Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge, Vol. 5

Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India

Culture, Identity and Politics

Badri Narayan

WOMEN HEROES AND DALIT ASSERTION IN NORTH INDIA

Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge

Series Editors: Simon R. Charsley and G.K. Karanth

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WOMEN HEROES AND DALIT ASSERTION IN NORTH INDIA

Culture, Identity and Politics

CULTURAL SUBORDINATION AND THE DALIT CHALLENGE, VOLUME 5

BADRI NARAYAN

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For those
who are struggling
to make their future better

Aalishan chunaria meri, photudar ranga dena
Mool niwasi diwano ka, naksha ajab bana dena
Dhanush liye Eklavya dhanurdhar, photu sher babar sa ho
Mang raha ho guru angootha, chhal karate dikhla dena
Manoram ashram me tap karate, Shambook muni darasha dena
Chamakati hui talwar haath me, hatyare ko dikhala dena
San sattavan ki gadar chhapi ho, usme Jhansi dikhala dena
Angrejo ka sar katati, Jhalkari devi chhapawa dena
Kshatrani ka vesh bana ho, sherani sam garajati ho.

(Translated)

(This splendid veil of mine, dye it with photographs,
Make unique the map of the crazy original settlers,
In the photograph of Eklavya holding a bow and arrow,
Make him look like a brave tiger.
When the Guru asks for his thumb, show him doing treason.
Show Shambook Muni meditating in a serene Ashram,
And show his killers holding shining swords in their hands.
When depicting the revolt of 1857, show Jhansi, and show
Jhalkaridevi cutting off the heads of the British,
Wearing the dress of a Kshatrani, roaring like a tiger.)

(Ramesh Chandra Bauddh, Jai-Jai Bhim Mahaan, Songs of BSP,
Cultural Publisher, Lucknow)

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List of Abbreviations

BAMCEF	All India Backward (SC, ST and OBC) and Minority Communities Employees Federation
BC	Backward Caste
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
DS4	Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samity
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
OBC	Other Backward Caste
RPI	Republican Party of India
SC	Scheduled Caste
SP	Samajwadi Party
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UDF	Udadevi Force
UP	Uttar Pradesh

Series Editors' Note

When this series, *Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, to which this volume is a valuable new contribution, began in 1998, interest in its topic, both practical and academic, was already expanding. Dalit cultural assertion in the literary field had been active for decades, best known in Maharashtra and Karnataka. With the help of this, exploitation, discrimination and insult could be publicly challenged so that the deep sense of humiliation so widely occasioned by them could be, if only slightly, eased. The Dalit challenge, which took the form of printing and publishing, is significant because it highlights the modern Dalit achievement in the writer-and-readership of education. The Dalit assertion produced a literature of escape, escape from undeserved distress in a past which, as Ambedkar had expressed it, contained nothing of which Dalits could be proud. By the 1990s things began to change. A research project in Karnataka into local efforts to break out, through individual economic enterprise, from untouchability and its disabilities eventually became the first volume of this series in 1998. Experience here alerted us to more than we had been looking for. We became acutely conscious of the cultural contributions, always being made by Dalit castes to their society, first in the field of popular religion. More surprisingly, we found that they were often still making them. The inadequacies of any perspective that regarded the Dalits only as excluded and as victims of the caste order and the direct actions of the dominant within the caste hierarchy became clear. We felt, however that direct and radical challenges to cultural subordination still remained in the shadows. The series title that had been adopted at that point was geared towards further research in the field more than it echoed the achievements we had made so far.

Deeper and more direct challenges had come into clearer focus from elsewhere. Conspicuous in this was Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu* of 1996 and the widespread and often agitated reactions it elicited. In those years, Ilaiah himself examined the philosophical and technological heritage of those he termed Dalit-Bahujans in Andhra Pradesh—Madigas, Adivasis, Washermen and others. He published newspaper articles and booklets, now in Telugu, for the attention of those most directly concerned. With expanding literacy and heightened inter-caste

competition in the Mandal years, revisiting the past by exploring caste heritages became, at least in some conspicuous regions, both practicable and relevant to contemporary concerns. Identities, the negativity of which had been previously conspicuous, began to be proclaimed positively. Most striking, perhaps, was the adoption of 'Madiga', once amongst the most derogatory of untouchable caste names in Andhra Pradesh as a surname to be proclaimed by a new political leadership. A renewal of caste organization has been expanding through the lower reaches of the traditional order. Victimhood ceased to be sufficient. The range of Dalit cultural assertion, as we now see it so clearly presented in Badri Narayan's work, was deepening and diversifying.

The ever-expanding Dalit assertion brought with it a major new problem however. How would this awareness of positive cultural difference and resurgence of activity at the level of individual castes be compatible with a unified Dalit movement? The issue soon presented itself in Andhra Pradesh, for instance, after the spectacular emergence of the Madiga Dandora Movement in 1997 and the massive support it mobilized through its 1,000 km march from the village of the chief minister to the capital. The march proclaimed the Madiga name through the distinctive Madiga drum and its beat, and a tradition of song and dance, both of which had simultaneously been symbolically central to the caste and its identity, as well as challenging to others. The direct political goal of the march was, however, a division of the quota of Scheduled Caste reservation that had over the past two or even three generations benefited the other major Dalit caste of the state, the Malas, far more extensively than the Madigas. A four-fold division of the single quota in proportion to the population of groupings of similarly placed castes was the principle demand, which was at least briefly achieved. It was not a direct attack on the Malas but it inevitably affected their interests most directly. Old antagonisms were inflamed anew and Mala caste organization was brought into action to oppose the reform. An era of co-operation within a unified Dalit movement ended and the movement itself was stalled.

It is in this expanding field of culturally grounded caste assertion among the Dalit and other marginalized communities that Badri Narayan has been researching and from which he has been publishing his detailed studies over this same period. He focusses on North India and has a significantly different and perhaps more encouraging story to tell. His focal region is eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar and his book fits closely into our series also in the way it closely complements Sudha Pai's *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution*. They share a central

concern with the Bahujan Samaj Party, its founder, Kanshi Ram and its former Chief Minister Mayawati, but they approach this interest very differently. For Badri Narayan, the departure point is with the people at the grass roots in villages and towns rather than the political elite themselves. According to Narayan, imagination and memory, which may be constructed out of myth and history, is 'the foundational requirement for the identity, self-respect and social existence of the marginalized communities in an age of power, conflict and competition.' He addresses the process by which positive claims of identity are established by these once marginalized castes. They are claims not to sympathy and support but to fame and power. In his region, Narayan finds two striking characteristics. One, the female heroes who have often been at the centre of these imaginings. They are heroes, not heroines, which commonly carries powerful but misleading gender stereotypes. Female heroes link meaningfully into a concern with local goddesses reaching back into the indefinite past. This volume specifically concerns itself with female heroes.

The other significant element of Dalit imaginings, explored in this book, is the great uprising of 1857, against the British—for the British, it was the Indian Mutiny, and for their challengers, the First War of Indian Independence. This book will show that the events of the 1857 Rebellion are a rich source to be tapped by caste associations for heroes, in order to acquire a positive identity. In all this Badri Narayan provides the English-language reader, with benefits not only of his first-hand researches over many years of grass-roots interaction, but also of his access to the by-now voluminous literature, in Hindi and other languages, of the people themselves, historians and activists. Narayan offers insight into a wholly different dimension of politics.

Only time and the further research that this work will certainly stimulate will indicate how generalizable Narayan's findings are across India. What is clear is that the rising assertiveness of Dalit castes is widespread. Both the political and the research agendas surrounding caste have shifted. Research in this area has witnessed a flurry of new sociological publications as the 20th century gave way to the new millennium. Dipankar Gupta's recent edited volume, *Caste in Question* (2004), to which Badri Narayan himself contributed, signalled the shifts in the subtitle of the book, *Hierarchy or Idenity?*, with remarkable clarity, giving importance to the Dalit castes in its chapters. Here, we see Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party adopting a strategy of caste mobilization through individual heroes for unifying not just the core Dalit castes but a wider section of the population that could deliver electoral majorities and

therefore power in a democracy. Significant to this volume is the simultaneous construction of both individual caste identities and Dalit or even still more widely embracing identities that the analysis here identifies in UP.

What remains to be seen is whether this remarkable phenomenon can be evidenced in other regions.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Very often myths are more influential than reality, and very often myths give new meaning to reality. Memories too often help people triumph over an oppressive present and the past is often invented in new forms to overcome such a present. This can be seen in the case of many historically marginalized communities who give new interpretations to their past to suit the needs of their present, in order to move towards a better and brighter future. The Dalit castes of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in North India, who have always been ostracized and oppressed by the upper castes under the Brahminical cultural code of conduct still flourishing in this state, forms one such group. Though these castes together form the majority of the population, they have always been looked down upon by the upper castes, which in comparison to the Dalits form only a handful. Their cultural resources too have always been reviled by the hegemonic upper caste cultural code.

At present, however, a drastic change is noticeable in the socio-cultural scenario of this region, which has come out of the political and democratic processes of the country. In the last few decades, these erstwhile marginalized sections have been asserting their identities through myths, legends, heroes and histories of their own castes. Many heroes of these castes have begun to symbolize their caste identities, evoking feelings of pride and glory within their members. The political discourse of the Dalits today is based on their own culture, which is founded on caste heroes and the collective memories around them. These heroes and their myths help them to develop a new emancipatory cultural form that subverts the Brahminical code and resists the constant humiliation faced by them in their everyday lives that is sanctioned by the ancient texts of the upper castes.

Searching for heroes who could give voice to the assertion of their identity and who could be used for winning political power is undoubtedly a radical and emancipatory political transformation in culture. This process had been initiated by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the party which aimed at bringing all the scattered Dalit castes under one political umbrella. The BSP was the first to understand the significance of heroes

as resources. Consequently, it developed a language of political mobilization filled with references to them so that this language could be easily understood by Dalits at the grass roots in whose oral traditions these heroes were still present. From the multitude of heroes of the various castes the BSP picked out a few women heroes of the 1857 rebellion who were projected as symbols of Dalit identity and who were then used to build up the image of Mayawati, the leader of the BSP. The success of the party's political strategy can be judged by the fact that Mayawati was the first Dalit woman to become the chief minister of the feudal, patriarchal and caste ridden state of UP.

How and why these heroes, and the myths and legends surrounding them, assume greater significance than the obvious economic issues facing the largely poor and underprivileged Dalits living in villages and small towns, is the underlying question of this study. For this purpose, my research teams have been travelling across the state of UP for the last seven or eight years. The immense popularity wielded by these heroes is evident in the stories narrated by the people at grass-roots level, their statues erected at various places, the plays narrating their bravery, the folk songs based on them and in the collective memories about them in the popular psyche of the people. This has inspired us to carry our study forward. This study would not have been possible without the support of people like Bhullar, Jhuria, Pyarelal, Babulal Bhanwra and other Dalit brothers and sisters of village Shahabpur, a village in UP, and the people of other regions of UP like the eastern region (Purvanchal), Bundelkhand and the central region (Awadh). We had developed very close ties with these people, and their narratives formed the data base of the study. Their warm hospitality and heartfelt enthusiasm gave me the confidence to move ahead.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor R.C. Tripathi, Director, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, who provided me the infrastructure for conducting this study. Thanks are also due to my colleagues in the institute for their constant intellectual stimulation. This book is based on the project, 'Myth, Memory and Politics: A Study of the Language of Mobilisation of Grassroot Dalits.' I would like to place on record my gratitude to ICSSR for funding this project, and to Shailesh Upadhyaya, Surya Prakash Upadhyaya and Mousumi Majumder, who assisted me in conducting research for the project. I am grateful to Mousumi for translating all the Hindi pieces in this book into English. I am also grateful to the research team of the Dalit Resource Centre,

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INTRODUCTION

Chhapak perh chhiwuliya patai ghan gahabar ho,
tahi tar khar hairniya ta man ati unman ho.
Charatai charat harinwa tau harini se puchhai ho,
harini ki tore charaha jhurane ki pani bin murjhai ho.
Nahi more charaha jhurane na pani binu murjhai ho,
ye ho aaj hawe raja ke barahiya tuhe mari daihai ho.
Machiya baithal Kaushilya rani ta harini araj karai ho,
rani masawa to sijhai rasoia khalari hame detiau ho.
Perawa pa tangwai khalaria mania samujhaiwai ho,
rani nit uthi darshan karabai manau harina jitai ho.
Jau Harini ghar aapan khalaria nahi debai ho,
harini khalari ke khanjhari marahaibaita ram more khelihai ho.
Jab jab bajai khanjharia sabad suni anakai ho,
yeho thari dhekulia ke nichawa ta harini bisurai ho.

(Translated)

(There was once a *chhiwuli* tree in Ayodhya near the palace of King Dasharath, under which a deer was weeping. When Rani Kaushalya heard the crying, she came out to find out why the deer was weeping. The deer replied that King Dasharath had taken away her cub and killed it. The deer wanted its skin back so that she could fill it with sawdust and pretend it was real so that her milk, which had dried up, could flow again. This way the gnawing pain inside her heart would be released. On this the queen said that she could not do so since the skin was needed to make a musical instrument (*khanjari*) for Lord Rama, who was then a baby, to play with. The Dalits of today are the descendants of this female deer and even today they are being oppressed by the uppercaste feudal landlords.)

This story was narrated by a folk singer of Jagriti Dasta of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) at a political rally in Karchhana tahsil, Allahabad district,

on 4 March 2004. I would like to add that many such female deer have been born in Dalit communities who have now become sources of inspiration for the members of this community.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AND core feature of India's social structure is its caste system. Even after nearly sixty years of Indian independence, caste and the entrenched caste hierarchy still remain the symbol and essence of Indian society, differentiating it from other societies. This hierarchy, which accords some castes the privilege and the power to dominate over other castes, has been present in Indian history since time immemorial. The dominant Brahminical cultural code accords the so-called lower castes a highly inferior position in society and has drained them of dignity and self-respect in every domain of their lives. The lower castes, or Dalits as they prefer to be called, have always been marginalized by the upper castes, who have forced them to remain within the confines of their lowly birth-based menial occupations. The caste sytem has frozen mobility in social structure and socio-economic relations (Ilaiah 1994: 669). In the recent past, however, there is a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity, which challenges the humiliation that they have faced for centuries. There has emerged a strong urge among these marginalized groups throughout the country to assert their identity and self-respect through their own cultural resources and challenge the cultural hegemony of the upper castes. This is powerfully visible in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh (UP), which lies in the Hindi heartland and has one of the largest population and land areas in the country.

The area of UP is 236,286 sq. km. Its population is 166,052,859 (2001 Census). The state is spread across a vast expance in the heartland of India starting from the north-western to the south-eastern ends of the country. Physically, it can be divided into two parts—the Gangetic Plain and the Vindhyan Hills. The Gangetic Plain is divided into two major portions in UP. These are the Upper Ganges and the Middle Ganges Plains. The Upper Ganges Plains lie mainly in UP, while a part of the Middle Ganges Plains also lie in Bihar. The Upper Ganges Plains can be roughly divided into two parts at the confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganga in Allahabad, the point which divides the entire state into eastern UP and western UP.

It is a noteworthy fact that economically, and concomitantly, socially and culturally, eastern and western UP greatly differ from each other. Western UP, which borders the rich state of Punjab, is far more prosperous than eastern UP, which borders the poor state of Bihar. Districts like

Bulandshahr, Meerut and Saharanpur, which lie in western UP, have been engaged in a broad process of agricultural development, because of which there is no overwhelming poverty in these districts, although UP, overall, is one of the poorest states of the country. Irrigation is well advanced and the farmers are very close in spirit to the hard working Punjabis. The eastern part of UP is the polar opposite of western UP, since the farmers here are not as enterprising as those in western UP even though the land resources are very high. This region has remained neglected and backward, which has encouraged people to believe that the people here are lethargic, caste ridden, tradition-bound and unresponsive to change. There is a high rate of migration from this region, a large proportion of its population moving to cities in western UP, Punjab and other relatively more prosperous parts of India in search of work. In the middle of eastern and western UP lie the Central Plains, which occupy an intermediary position between the two extremes of the west and the east. The economic growth in the region is sluggish and the standard of living is just above average though better than in the east. The farmers are not as hard working as in western UP though they work relatively harder than those of eastern UP (Pai 1986: 4–5).

In total there are 70 districts in this state, which differ widely from each other in terms of socio-economic development. What is, however, common in all the districts is the dominant Brahminical cultural code, which is still active and flourishing despite the fact that the Dalits and other oppressed castes constitute a majority in the population and that the system of protective discrimination is more than half a century old. The ill effects of the heirarchical caste system, which this dominant Brahminical cultural code has spawned, have prevented the fruits of development from reaching the large majority of Dalits. But the recent periods have seen a new generation of post-independence educated, upwardly mobile, socially aware and political conscious Dalits, who, through the BSP, aim at ensuring social justice within the society and polity for the *Dalit-Bahujan* (lower caste majority section). Contrary to popular conception, the party came into existence as a reaction to the social, political and economic exclusion faced by the Dalits from the benefits of development, and not with an agenda of breaking down the caste system (Charsley and Karanth 2002: xii). Realising that caste is much more an emotional issue than a religious one (Ilaiah 1994: 669), the BSP, which had been launched by Kanshi Ram in UP in 1984, converted caste into an ideology and tried to capture power by the re-creation of a culture of dissent among the Dalits of this state.

This strategy has helped in strengthening their socio-cultural and political mobilization and has provided a popular base for their participation in the democratic and political processes of the state and of the country. It was in 1995 that a Dalit political party came into power, for the first time, in UP, with a Dalit woman, Mayawati, who was the leader of the BSP, as chief minister. Although the ideology of the BSP was based on the unfulfilled mission of Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar, which was to provide identity and social respect to the Dalits, it laid strong emphasis on the construction of a Dalit identity through the creation of icons and symbols. These icons and symbols were culled out of the culture of Dalits as markers of pride and glory. As observed by Ashis Nandy, the fixed political language touches only the less important self of the society, but when it mixes with culture it goes much deeper. This is because Indian society is organized more around culture than around its politics (Nandy 1990: 49). The BSP was the only party that realized this in the context of Dalit politics in North India and tried to concretize the identity of a 'majority society' (*bahujan samaj*) through the alliance of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) by rallying around their culture and identity. Like Ilaiah, Kanshi Ram believed that unless the culture and consciousness of the oppressed is put forward visibly in public debate and is prepared to clash with the culture and consciousness of the enemy in public, a society of equals will remain an illusion (Ilaiah 1996: 168). In other North Indian states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and so on, which are also caste divided but where the BSP is not active, Dalits have not been able to come together as a single group in a big way so as to assert their power and identity. In these states, caste has not emerged as an ideology and although the Dalits there have acquired, to some extent, a consciousness about their marginalized socio-cultural status, this has not been converted into a political consciousness. In Bihar, for example, many left parties and radical groups are fighting for the rights of the oppressed and exploited, but in fragmented forms, without any effort to consolidate them into a homogeneous category. In this state too one can find a dissenting culture among the oppressed and exploited Dalit castes but it has not been transformed into a political consciousness like it has with the BSP in UP; although even in this case culture is being used, to some extent, as an instrument to mobilize peasant labourers by the parties influential there. In UP, the BSP has helped to develop Dalitness as an important idealogical constituent in the construction of their identity. Converting caste into an ideology and capturing political power through parliamentary means is

an important development in the Indian political system, which was achieved successfully by the BSP under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati (Ilaiah 1994: 669).

There appear to be five elements behind this strategy for Dalit empowerment. First, the struggle for participation in the power structure of the country, especially in the bureaucracy and political leadership (*satta aur shasan*), through the use of cultural symbols and identity markers. Second, the deepening of the process of democracy so that all the marginalized Dalit communities may be free to invoke their own cultural symbols without the fear of being suppressed by the dominant Brahminical culture. Third, the belief of the BSP leadership that these cultural symbols of Dalits will help the community to develop the confidence to fight against socio-economic inequality. Fourth, providing respect to these personalities who have done pioneering work for the uplift of the Dalits and giving them their rightful space in history and fifth, the belief that in their struggle to provide respect to these personalities, the Dalit communities will also attain respect, which will consequently facilitate in elevating their position in society.

But is this identity-based politics merely the politics of tokenism or is it a long-term investment for Dalits to subvert the humiliation that they have faced for centuries, and to regain their pride by placing their struggle for empowerment in the democratic domain of society? Many critiques of Mayawati and the BSP claim that during her tenure she spent huge amounts of money on installing statues, memorials and parks rather than on development activities. Mayawati, however, argued that one of the most notable achievements of her government was the glorification of the personalities who had struggled to bring about social change. Every official publication brought out during Mayawati's tenure as chief minister, highlighting her achievements, mentioned that she had waged a battle to bestow due respect on Dalit saints, gurus, heroes and other great Dalit personalities.[1] The naming of districts and universities after Dalit icons greatly enhanced the feelings of self-respect and self-worth in the Dalits who visited them. That the BSP understood this can be evidenced from the fact that in a public meeting addressed by Mayawati, the people were promised that if the sisters and daughters of the BSP were given power, then she would change the names of all the districts which had been named by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after upper-caste personalities.[2]

In the introduction to the book *Samajik Parivartan ke Liye Sangharsh Karnewale Mahapurushon ka Samman*, published by the Department of Information and Broadcasting, Government of UP, when the BSP was

in power, Mayawati says that since the last 2,500 years, great persons, such as Mahatma Buddha, Maharshi Valmiki, Eklavya, Kabirdas, Ahilyabai Holkar, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, have waged wars to bring in social change. As a result of their efforts, people belonging to the downtrodden, backward and deprived communities are now staking their claim in the democratic processes of the country. They are also actively participating in the fight against social inequality and injustice and striving hard to lead a life of dignity and self-respect.[3] The strategy of installing statues of and glorifying the leaders of the Dalit struggle was carried forward in all the three terms of the BSP rule in UP so as to inspire in the Dalits a need for social change. From this it is obvious that the political strategy of celebrating the memory of these great personalities was a deliberate one in order to build up confidence among the Dalit communities.

Various studies show how marginalized castes are becoming conscious about their caste and are entering into the competitive domain of democratic politics, for example, Anuja Agrawal's (2004) study of the Bedia caste, Lucia Michelutti's (2004) study of the Yadavs and so on. Castes are now proud of their identity regardless of where textual traditions place tham on the 'purity-pollution' hierarchy. Ahirs, Gujars, Jats, Patidars, Adi-Dharmis and so on have a strong sense of pride in their caste identity (Gupta 2004: xiii). Interestingly, there is even an apparent replication of the dominant social order within the lower-caste community, which may be one way of articulating an independent cultural identity, besides demonstrating dissent against the hegemonic social order (Karanth 2004).

Why are heroes and histories so important in the political and social struggle of the Dalits and for the assertion of their identity? At which point does imagination start creating reality? Why are myths sometimes more real than reality? When do questions like 'who are we?' become central issues in the political mobilization and emancipatory politics of marginalized communities? How are stories, statues, craft and politics developed around these questions? In this book we will search for answers to these questions not from the elite perspective but rather try to analyse the inner logic that lies around these issues within Dalit politics in UP.

This book studies the burgeoning Dalit politics in North India especially in UP, a politics that is based on Dalit dissenting culture, women heroes (*viranganas*) and icons and on how these are used as symbols of Dalit assertion even as the BSP build up the image of Mayawati, the present leader of the BSP. The invention, reconstruction and representation of

the myths and memories of the role of Dalits in the 1857 Rebellion, and their use in electoral mobilization by the BSP in gaining the support of Dalit communities, is also a focus of study in this book. In this manner, the book tries to understand the relationship between cultural politics and the democratic participation of marginalized communities of UP. The book will bring out the hidden issues related to identity construction, which underlie the obvious issues related to the fulfilment of basic needs and socio-economic development, and will examine how they are being used to politically mobilize the Dalits at the grass-roots level. The book will also try to explore the sources from where these icons of cultural identity construction and politics originated, how they are being used as identity markers in their political mobilization, their influence on the collective memory of Dalit communities and why the influence that they wield is so powerful. Also examined is the evolution of the dissenting culture of Dalit communities emerging through these cultural symbols, which is becoming increasingly assertive at present.

In this respect, the book is a continuation of the discussions made by Sudha Pai (2002) in her book *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Agenda*. In her book, she has critically, yet sympathetically, tried to analyse whether the BSP has helped in empowering the vast majority of subaltern Dalits or whether it has merely helped in the upward mobility of the elite sections of the Dalits. She has also investigated the larger phenomenon of Dalit assertion and its relationship with the BSP. The study examines the emergence, ideology, programmes, mobilizational strategies and electoral progress of the BSP, against the backdrop of two important changes in UP since the early 1980s: the strong wave of Dalit assertion and the shift from a broad aggregated single-party system to a cleavage-based multi-party system in the post-Congress phase. She believes that the uniqueness of the BSP is a product of both the democratization process and the affirmative action policies of the state in post-independence India. But in the recent past, as an outcome of its political compulsions, the BSP is being forced to make alliances with parties with whom it has had strong disagreements on principles. At the end of her book, Pai has also tried to discuss new forms of Dalit assertion through cultural symbols such as the symbol of Ambedkar as used in the political mobilization at the grass-roots level. Here she provides space for discussing culture as politics, culture and politics, and the culture of politics, as present in contemporary Dalit mobilization in UP.

This is the other side of the politics of Dalit assertion and mobilization that I will attempt to explore in my book. In brief, this book is an attempt

to capture the process of Dalit mobilization as it takes place in the state of UP through the use of dissenting cultural resources like myths, legends, local heroes and histories. It is an attempt to understand the constituents of and the processes that make the language of Dalit political mobilization in this region. In essence, the book is an extension of my earlier studies on how myths and legends of different regions of North India. For example, the myth of Chuharmal and Reshma, popular in the Mokama district of Bihar (Narayan 2001b), the myth of Suhaldev, popular in the Bahraich region of UP (Narayan 2005), and the myths popular among castes like the Nishads (ibid.) are being used for the electoral mobilization of particular caste groups by various political parties. This book attempts to carry forward the same train of ideas and studies how the Dalits of UP create an alternative history as a form of dissent, from which the BSP culls out women heroes and the myths surrounding them to build up the image of its leader Mayawati. It will focus primarily on three women heroes of the 1857 Rebellion, namely Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi, who are being used by the BSP, among other heroes of the rebellion like Avantibai Lodhi and Pannadhai, to build the image of Mayawati. The field work for the study was carried out in the Bundelkhand region, the Awadh region and some villages of eastern UP where these three heroes on whom the study is based are popular.

Another dimension that the book will explore is how Dalit imagination of their past in the nation-making process, especially their role in the 1857 Rebellion, is used as a mobilizational resource by the upcoming Dalit communities themselves to reassert their contemporary desires for more benefits, discriminatory protective policies and an appropriate share in ongoing development projects launched by the Indian State. The point of departure is the apparent role of imagination as the foundational requirement for the identity, self-respect and social existence of marginalized communities in an age of power, conflict and competition.

Women Heroes and the Cultural Dynamics of Dalit Politics

A few studies on the caste system of India have tried to show that the lower and untouchable castes have no culture of their own and, instead, replicate the dominant social order within their communities (Dumont 1980; Moffat 1979). According to Gupta, these studies deny the very

existence of cultural autonomy among lower castes, and, instead, group them all together as if there is a solidarity among them sufficient to replicate that from which they have been excluded (Gupta 2000: 54–85). Deliege (1992) refutes Moffat's hypothesis because of lack of evidence for such solidarity. Empirical studies, on the other hand, like that by Karanth (2004), show that replication may also be seen as a way of establishing an independent cultural identity as well as expressing dissent against the hegemony of the dominant social order. Such dissent, however, does not go unchallenged, and in his study, he points both to the hegemonic dominance of the upper castes and to the means which are at the disposal of untouchable castes to achieve cultural autonomy (ibid.: 138). My own study of the Mokama district in Bihar shows that there are multiple cultures existing there of which the culture of the lower-caste Dusadhs is an important one. The study tries to bring out the manner in which the Dusadhs create an alternative space by subverting the mainstream culture through their own cultural resources like their myths, legends, folk tales and folk heroes, and how various political parties use them to mobilize this community under their electoral fold (Narayan 2001b). In UP, the strategy of the BSP was to explore these alternative spaces, created through the cultural resources of the different Dalit castes of the state, which are able to arouse within them self confidence and a consciousness about their identity, as also develop social solidarity among the newly created alliances of these castes that have undergone centuries of humiliation by the upper castes. With this objective, the BSP evolved a pantheon of local heroes and symbols from backward and Dalit communities who could be revered by this section as their caste symbols (Kumar and Sinha 2001: 89). These characters, who were picked up from the stories and legends popular among Dalits at the grass-roots level, were given a new interpretation by party intellectuals and politicians in their political speeches. These were then circulated back to the population at the grass roots so as to create a new memory and imagination. The Dalit icons of Maharashtra and South India like Dr Ambedkar and Periyar were also given due importance but the primary focus was on the heroes who were rooted to the soil of this region. In this manner, the BSP developed an icon-based politics, which suited the collective memory of the people of this region. These folk stories and folk songs with dissenting narratives, which were transformed into liberative, emancipatory messages, were disseminated to the people through Cultural Squads (*Jagriti Dasta*). The squads presented these transformed messages to the people living in

villages through songs, poems and dramas at political rallies just before elections were scheduled. One such propaganda song goes like this:

Beeyespee ki neeti nirali jo sunle sukh paye
Yug yug se is desh ka bahujan jaldi hi sukh paye
Jyoti Rao, Ravidas, Subba ne jiske liye kurbani di
Babasahab Jhalkari ne apni amit nishani di
Tumhe chhorke bahujan ka itihas likha na jae

(Translated)

(BSP's strategy is unique, whoever hears will be happy
The oppressed Bahujan over the years will soon find joy
For whom Jyoti Rao, Ravidas, Subba sacrificed their lives
Babasahab and Jhalkari left their indelible marks
Without you the history of the Bahujans cannot be written)[4]

This song shows how the memories of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and Ravidas have been blended with the memory of local heroines like Jhalkaribai of the 1857 Rebellion to create the memory of Dalit heroes over the years. Evidently, the BSP strategy of creating a language of political mobilization involves delving into the collective culture of the Dalits, which is a repository of myths, heroes and legends.

When Mayawati, a Dalit woman, succeeded Kanshi Ram as its leader, the BSP modified its strategy in order to build up her image as a woman who had all the qualities to lead the party. It developed an aggressive marketing strategy to sell Mayawati and the ideology of the BSP at the popular level. To do this, it picked out a few local women heroes like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Mahaviridevi, Avantibai Lodhi and Pannadhai, from among the many other Dalit heroes of the 1857 Rebellion in order to help people identity them with Mayawati. There may be two reasons for selecting women for building up the image of Mayawati. First, goddesses feature more than gods in *Dalit-Bahujan* narratives (Ilaiah 1996: 188). Ilaiah mentions that Pochamma is the most popular goddess in Andhra Pradesh. So also, in UP too goddesses are very influential in the collective psyche of the people at the grass roots. They believe that whenever good or bad happens, it happens because of the anger or happiness of the goddesses.[5] These goddesses protect the people from all kinds of natural calamities, especially diseases, and thus their devotees hold them in very high esteem. Second, these heroes were portrayed as having played significant roles in the 1857 Rebellion along with mainstream nationalist heroes like Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat

Mahal, but who were not given proper recognition due to the contrivances of the upper castes. A collective memory was recreated around these heroes in those parts of UP where their stories were popular and integral to their oral history, through the construction of statues and memorials and the organization of fairs and celebrations in memory of these heroes. The 1857 Rebellion was selected as the backdrop for narrating their heroism because this rebellion, which came to be known as the 'First War of Independence,' was an event that made deep inroads into the psyche of the people of North India and is present more in popular oral traditions rather than in the written form.

The 1857 Rebellion was concentrated in the North Indian Gangetic belt beginning from Delhi to Bengal. It began in Meerut on 10 May after news spread that the garrisons in Delhi had revolted and expelled the British. This acted as a catalyst that saw a great deal of activity on the part of the civil population, leading to its spread to other parts of UP. There were uprisings on 20 May in Aligarh, on 23 May in Etawah and Mainpuri and on 27 May in Etah (Mukherjee 2001: 65). In this way, the rebellion moved to other parts of UP and Bihar like Kanpur, Awadh, Banaras, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Bahraich, Sitapur, Ghazipur, Sultanpur, western Bihar and finally to Bengal. In upper India, it was more in the form of a turbulent agrarian upheaval gathering together a wide variety of discontents. The rebellion had not yet taken the form of an organized movement against the British but it commanded extensive popular support, especially in Oudh, throughout the North Western Provinces and in western Bihar. Sepoy discontent was an essential ingredient of the rebellion but the mutiny derived its strength from the civil population (Metcalf 1990: 60). Peasants, political *sadhu*s (Pinch 1996: 9), local kings and most importantly the conservative sections of society, who had suffered greatly under the British rule, became united against fighting colonialism. The British Government put up a stiff resistance to the rebellion. Their retribution was harsh and deadly. Village after village were burnt or felled with cannon balls to quash the rebellion. Thousands of rebels were hung from gallows and an equally large number were hung from trees as instant punishment. Although the rebellion ultimately failed, it developed a consciousness about colonialism within the people, especially of the Awadh region of UP where the rebellion was most intense. It could also be described as the beginning of a rennaissance in the Hindi speaking region of India. The scanty recorded history of that period did not, however, document the large number of battles fought by the common people as part of the rebellion and which had left a lasting impression on

their minds. Recorded history only told the stories of rich feudal landlords, and kings and queens like Rani Laxmibai and Tantya Tope. The stories of unsung heroes who played their role behind the curtain of written history were circulated only in oral history in rural North India. This fact gave the Dalit intellectuals a lot of space to pick out their own heroes of the 1857 movement and use some of them for building up the image of Mayawati. It is interesting to note that the role of the Dalits in the 1857 Rebellion has been negated by a few extreme Ambedkarite and leftist journalists and scholars who have tried to link it with dissatisfied feudal lords, kings, soldiers and peasants (Mishra and Kumar 2002: 12). The BSP has, however, found a wealth of resources in the oral history of the regions of UP where the rebellion took place and has tried to mobilize Dalits at the grass-roots level using local heroes, histories, myths and legends.

Mayawati first came to power for a brief period of four months in June 1995 and then for six months in March 1997. It was for the first time in the history of independent India that a Dalit woman had become a ruler and that too of the most populous and, caste-wise, most fragmented state of the country. This was no mean achievement for her since UP society is also the most feudal and patriarchal. But she defied all the existing norms and mustered enough courage to challenge openly the powerful institutions that oppress the poor Dalits. Not only this, she proved to be an able administrator, turning on its head the age-old allegation that Dalits cannot rule. Her powerful personality won her the title 'Iron Lady', after Jamil Akhter, a reputed journalist authored a book in Hindi, called *Iron Lady: Kumary Mayawati* (Akhtar 1999). Kanshi Ram, her mentor, also reiterated the title for her, which appeared to be based on the toughness exhibited during her rule. The lawlessness of UP was so widespread that Mayawati had to put behind bars about 145 thousands rowdies, criminals and *goonda*s (Kumar and Sinha 2001: 86). This and other such attempts to discipline the state evoked a sense of satisfaction among the Dalits who had been routinely subjected to humiliation and callousness at all fronts. She proved to be a highly popular leader of the Dalits and Bahujans, whose sense of dignity and self-esteem were significantly elevated under her chief ministership. The Dalit women attending the general meetings and rallies of the BSP, who easily outnumber the women attending meetings of other parties exclusively for women (Bharti 1996: 23) mainly because they are freer than upper-caste women to leave their houses, also identified strongly with her. This has been used as a leverage by the Bahujan Mahila Morcha, the women's

wing of the BSP, who, in their district conferences, exhort the women not to emulate Brahminical norms of womanhood, which is to be meek and submissive; but to be brave and assertive like the women heroes of their castes (Bharti 1996: 35).

Mayawati's Image Building and the Print Medium

Mayawati's acceptance as a leader of the masses was made possible, to a large extent, by the BSP's projection of brave women heroes as symbols of Dalit identity and by building up her image as an incarnation of these heroes. This was greatly catalysed by the print medium. Print media in the form of popular booklets, posters, handbills, pamphlets and so on played a very effective role in this process by disseminating stories about these heroines and their role in the 1857 Rebellion among the common people. Even since the emergence of print as a medium of mass communication, it has always been used as a potent tool for sensitizing the Dalit population as it helped to transmit information to the literate section of the common Dalit population. This medium has also been used by the Dalits and other marginalized communities of India to deconstruct the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism and create and disseminate their own history of struggle in nation-making. It was used to subvert the dominant narratives of Indian society that had always kept them marginalized. In addition to building their self-identity it also helped in their political mobilization, which was then translated into votes.

In the colonial period various lower castes had started writing their caste histories, from where the caste heroes and myths were culled out by different political parties for electoral mobilization of Dalit communities. The reaction of the Dalits to the oppression and suppression of the members of their community and the lack of awareness about their tradition and culture may be cited as the reasons that prompted them to write their own caste histories. The process gathered momentum after independence when a small section of the lower-caste communities expressed an urge to write their own caste histories so as to project them as alternative history. Projecting an alternative history was basic to their assertion for a respectable identity in the caste hierarchy prevalent in society. Identity was far more of a 'project' than a 'real' connection with a well-established past (Sarkar 2002: 45). This alternative history was disseminated among the common people through popular booklets and newspapers published from small towns of UP. They were written and composed by the Dalits themselves, containing legends and stories about

local heroes and their role in nation making. These were circulated within the literate section through various libraries such as Aadi Hindu Library, Ashok Pushtakalaya, Kanpur and Ambedkar Libraries that were set up in many regions of UP.[6] Many newspapers like *Achhut*, *Usha*, *Adi Manav* and *Samata* were also launched, most of which were based on Dr Ambedkar's philosophy. Through these papers, the editors and writers not only conveyed the philosophy of liberation from social castigation, but also established the significance of the print media in Dalit mobilization and identity formation. Henceforth, the print media has been a great driving force in bringing to the fore the pain and anguish of the Dalit sections of society, and also in finding the ways and means to emancipate them. It became a potent mode by which the arithmetic of power and politics could be represented, a mode which was later used extensively. Dalit social reformers like Swami Achhutananda, Badri Balmikanand and Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu made full use of it to challenge the Brahminical hegemonic order. Around the same period, Ambedkar raised the slogan to 'educate, organise and agitate' among Dalits. He also gave a concrete form to his ideas of education when he established the People's Education Society in Bombay in 1945 (Kumar and Sinha 2001a: 9). His message spread to UP through the educated Dalit sections and helped to develop a culture of reading, writing and publishing in this state as part of their struggle for social respect.

After independence there was a fall in the production of Dalit literature but in the last few decades since the emergence of the BSP in UP in 1984 there has been a sudden spurt in the publication of popular booklets (Narayan 2001a: 3924). These booklets were written by Dalit writers living in the small towns of UP, to express the aspirations and identities of their communities. The Dalits were disillusioned with the state because of the unkept promises made at the time of independence. They began to demand protective discrimination and a share in the development projects and welfare schemes launched by the government. At the time of the implementation of the Mandal Commission in 1990, many booklets were published, most of them centred on their past. Through these booklets the Dalits wanted to establish that the basis of their demand for reservation, as recommended by the Mandal Commission, was to correct the long history of oppression and suppression suffered by them. The logic posited by them was that earlier they had been the ruling community but the conspiracies of the upper castes had deprived them of their historic glorious status (Kushwaha 1993: 23). Through these booklets, the Dalits also assert their role in the making of the nation by re-narrating the story

of the nation. This story highlights the sacrifices made by various heroes of their castes by saying that despite the sacrifices made, their desires, dreams and promises are yet to be fulfilled. These narratives help them to demand a respectable place in the contemporary process of nation building and a substantial share in State-sponsored development projects and various other kinds of democratic benefits. By repeatedly narrating their role in the nation-making process, they put forward a moral logic in favour of reservations and social justice for themselves. They assert that despite their historical role in the building and development of this nation, the state has not helped them to recover from their past social, cultural and economic losses. They believe that their role has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the recorded history of nation making and their contribution in the freedom struggle has been completely ignored (Kushwaha 1993: 26). These booklets help to spread the feeling of nationalism among Dalits at the grass-roots level by putting forward their actual contribution to the freedom struggle and claiming compensation in the present. This nationalism is in effect 'a state of mind, an act of consciousness' (Kohn 1944: 10), made possible, as demonstrated by Benedict Anderson, through the development of newspapers, books and administrative bureaucracies that allowed millions of people to 'imagine' themselves as part of the same community (Anderson 1983). According to Anderson, this remarkable redefinition of identities results from cultural transformations that evolve along with new technologies for distributing information in the early modern era. New technologies disseminate new cultural narratives in newspapers and novels, all of which creating 'the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.' The Dalit intellectuals in the BSP used the print medium to their advantage both for claiming their share in the nation and for building the image of Mayawati.

From Dalit to Bahujan

In the context of contemporary Dalit politics, the term 'dalit' is a generic term including not only the untouchable (*achhut*) castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy, but also the socially undeveloped, oppressed, exploited lower castes that are not all untouchable. Thus Dalits include SCs, STs, the so-called criminal tribes, nomadic tribes, OBCs and other backward social groups. These are the communities that are socially, educationally, economically and culturally backward and have been so for many

centuries. The word 'dalit' is a recent one but the concept of Dalitness is old. The term 'dalit' in Sanskrit is derived from the root *dal*, which means to split, break, crack and so on. When used as an adjective it means amputated, stepped on, split, broken, burst, destroyed or crushed. Dalit implies those who have been broken and ground down by those above them in the social hierarchy in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of karma, pollution and legitimized caste hierarchy. 'Dalit' has come to symbolize change and revolution (Zelliot 2001). According to Nandu Ram, though the term 'Dalit' represents a particular social category of people, and it is now being used by all the untouchables irrespective of traditional and parochial caste distinctions as representative of their social identity.

The term Dalit was first used by Dr Ambedkar but some sources claim that Swami Shraddhanand, a follower of Arya Samaj, first coined it (Bechain 1997: 27). However, the etymology of the term goes back to the ancient times when they were known in the ancient Hindu religious texts as *shudra*s, *atishudra*s, *chandal*s, *antyuj* and so on. In the 19th century, a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, used the term 'Dalit' to describe the 'outcastes' and 'untouchables' as the 'oppressed and crushed victims of the Indian caste system.' Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes,' a term used by the British for what are now called the SCs. In 1930, a newspaper was published for the depressed classes in Pune called 'Dalit Bandhu' (Friends of Dalits) (ibid.: 98). Dr Ambedkar also used the word in his Marathi speeches. With increased sensitivity, the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle replaced it with a new term, 'Harijan,' coined by Mahatma Gandhi. In cultural parlance, they were all commonly known as *achhut* while in legal terminology they were called 'Scheduled Castes' or SCs. SCs were the castes listed in the schedule by the Government of India Act 1935. They were defined as 'such castes, races or tribes or parts or groups within castes, races or tribes, being castes, races, tribes, parts or groups which appear to His Majesty in Council to correspond to the classes of persons formerly known as the depressed classes, as His Majesty in Council may specify' (Government of India Act 1935, First Schedule, 26i). The purpose of lists in the schedules was electoral, since seats in legislative assemblies at the national and provincial levels were to be reserved for members of listed castes, and they were to form a primary electorate to choose candidates. An Indian Franchise Committee, assisted by, amongst others, the anthropologically learned Commissioner for the 1931 Census J.H. Hutton, deliberated at length over the criteria for

inclusion and over untouchability in particular (Charsley and Karanth 1998: 22–23).

Since the early years of listing was mainly for electoral purpose and was based on the stigma borne by the castes, many castes petitioned for exclusion after judging the other members that were included within this category. Soon, however, when the benefits became apparent, the very same castes tried to retain membership and the castes that had originally being excluded, tried to seek inclusion. Religion was another bone of contention, since the 1935 legislation, as 'untouchability' was a Hindu problem whereas the SCs were equated with 'Depressed Classes.' Lower castes that had converted to the Muslim and Christian faiths were sought to be excluded from either protection or benefit under this legislation (see Pinto 1992).

In UP, Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Khatik, Dusadh, Basor, Dhanuk, Balmiki, Kori, Dom, Gond, Kol, Dharikar, Kharwar, Musahar, Beldar, Kanjar, Nat, Bhuaiar, Ghasi, Habuda, Hari, Kalabaz, Kapadia, Karbal, Khairaha, Agariya, Badhik, Vadi, Baiswar, Bajaria, Bajagi, Balahar, Bangali (seller of snakeskin and herbs), Bansphor, Barwar, Bedia, Bhandu, Bauriya, Korwa, Lalbegi, Mazhabi (Kahada), Parika, Paradiya, Patri, Saharia, Sansiya, Bahelia, Balai, Bawaria and others are the untouchable castes included in the Dalit community by the Dalit political forces. Together they comprise 21 per cent of the total population or 29,300,000 people, of which the Chamar make up the largest percentage—55 per cent. Pasi is the next largest community, which has a population of nearly 3,425,929. Dhobi, Kori, Balmiki, Shilpkar, Khatik and Dhanuk are the other numerically important Dalit castes in the state (Prasad 1995: 20).

Dalits also include the Scheduled Tribes (STs) who are referred to as *adivasi* or original settlers in the Constitution of India. In 1931, they were given the name Scheduled Tribes after they were included in the list of communities that needed special attention. In UP the total population of STs is 22 per cent and they are mainly concentrated in Mirzapur and Sonebhadra. The so-called criminal castes are those that were listed as criminal tribes by the British. They were denotified in 1952 through a parliamentary act, and some of these castes were included among the SCs. Many of them are nomads who wander from place to place across the country (ibid.: 22).

The OBCs who are also included within the category of Dalit by Dalit political forces are those castes which occupy an intermediary position in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Economically and socially as backward as the untouchables, their touch was not considered polluting by the

upper castes. They could thus work as servants in their households. This led these castes to identify themselves more with the upper castes than with the untouchables and to keep away from them. Historically, this feeling of superiority has been the reason for the schism between OBCs and the untouchables. But after the implementation of the Mandal Commission report granting protective discrimination to SCs, STs the OBCs and the Backward Castes (BC), a unity was forged between the dalits and the OBCs against the upper castes during the anti-Mandal movement. At that time, a large chunk of the OBCs joined hands with the BSP and started identifying themselves with the Dalits. Simultaneously, the BSP also wooed many of the OBC castes using their myths and legends to link them with the Dalits. Earlier the majority of OBCs had been under the influence of the BJP which has been identified more with the upper castes. This helped to widen BSP's horizon but many OBCs castes like the Nishads are still with the BJP. The Samajwadi Party (SP) is also trying hard to win the sympathy of these castes. Some important OBC castes of UP are Kewat, Tewar, Garariya, Kahar, Nai, Mali, Bhar, Rajbhar, Bind and Kanera (Prasad 1995: 72). The BCs are the castes that lie above the OBCs but are lower than the upper castes in the caste hierarchy. They believe that the people of these castes were originally Brahmins and Kshatriyas who were declared social outcasts under the strict social and cultural code of conduct. As a result, many of them add the middle name 'Singh' to signify their affinity with the upper castes. Although the BSP in UP is trying hard to bring the BCs under their fold, these BCs prefer to link themselves with the SP. The Ahirs (Yadavs), Gujars, Kurmi, Lodhi, Kumhar, Darji, Lohar and Sonar are some of the major BCs of this region (ibid.: 74).

Today, after so many centuries of being relegated to the margins, the Dalits have come to occupy centre stage in the political arena of the country. The movement for their assertion, which was earlier concentrated in Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar, has now shifted to North India (UP, MP, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Bihar), with UP in the lead. This has been possible because of the emergence of the BSP which has its base in UP. Though Dalit leaders have been present in different political parties in the state, the BSP has overshadowed them through its methods of horizontal and differential mobilization (Kumar and Sinha 2001: 14). Kanshi Ram, the founder of the BSP has succeeded in changing the language of discourse in understanding caste, which locates caste in the analytical category of sociological position and not of economic position (Ilaiah 1994: 669). With the aim of avoiding the stigma

attached to the concept of 'dalit,' he floated the new concept of 'bahujan' (majority society), which while constituting 85 per cent of the country's population, have been suppressed, oppressed and exploited by the remaining 15 per cent of the upper castes (Kumar and Sinha 2001: 70). The Bahujans comprise the Dalits, OBCs and Minorities who together form the electoral base of the BSP. In Kanshi Ram's scheme 'bahujan' symbolizes not a majority as perceived by Budhha and Mahatma Phule but an ideological category that can create a base for political empowerment. Kanshi Ram was convinced that only with a significant share of the political power of the country would the Dalits be able to change the existing power structure and subvert the dominance of the upper castes, which constitute 15 per cent of the country's population. He further argued that minority rule over majority (Bahujans) is not just. Therefore, for the establishment of an order based on equality, liberty and fraternity each section of the society should be given representation according to their strength (population). Thus, the BSP was launched on 14 April 1984, the 83rd birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Omvedt has described its formation as deliberate and not reactive. She says:

> First in contrast to almost all other Dalit and Dalit-based organizations of the time, its formation and structure appears as deliberative and not reactive, emerging fourteen years after Kanshi Ram's resignation from government service. It has consistently refused a 'reactive' agitational stance, which has meant, in practice, staying out of many major Dalit struggles. (Omvedt 1994: 162)

Kanshi Ram as a leader showed strict adherence to the constitution and parliamentary democracy throughout his struggle. This trait brought him close to Ambedkar in the realm of political thought. Ambedkar also had full faith in parliamentary democracy. As Kuber (1991: 300) noted:

> He had full faith in parliamentary democracy and urged the cultivation of constitutional morality. He advocated the transformation of political democracy into social and economic democracy. To cultivate democratic trends, he urged the creation of public conscience. He explained public conscience as conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who was the sufferer and remarked that non-scheduled castes in villages did not fight for the scheduled castes.

To make the political power of the Dalits effective, Kanshi Ram criticized the political reservation (Articles 330 and 332) of the Dalits.

He believed that the Dalits who got political reservation after the 'Poona Pact' became the stooges of the upper castes and spoke the political language of the political parties that gave them reservation. For real representation, the Dalits did not need such reservations (Ram 1998: 79–123).

Today the BSP has attained the stature of a national party. It stands third in the country, in terms of the percentage of votes it has won, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress (I) ahead of it (Kumar and Sinha 2001: 73). For the first few times that it fought parliamentary elections it entered into alliances with the Samajwadi Party (SP), the BJP and Congress (I); but later on, the BSP leadership dropped the formula of pre-poll alliance with other political parties. Instead it tried to develop its organization independently by social political mobilization horizontally and differentially, differentially because the BSP is the only party with an ideology of the economic and social emancipation of the 'Bahujans,' but it has also organized the Dalit castes horizontally and intends to distribute power according to the percentage of each and every caste in the population, especially the Dalits and the most backward castes in the state as well as in the country. Thus, the mobilization can be called horizontal mobilization (ibid.: 81–84). In the next chapter, we will study the new narratives of Dalit politics which are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression, that are being used by the BSP to acquire political power through capture of state power. A political consciousness is being created among the Dalits, which is significantly helping in their mobilization. In this process, their consciousness is becoming not only cultural but also political.

Notes

1. *Samajik Parivartan Ke Liye Sangharsh Karne Wale Mahapurushon Ka Samman*. Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag, Uttar Pradesh, year not available; *Dalit, Pichhre Evam Alpasankhyakon Ke Liye Liye Gaye Kalyan Karya*. Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag, Uttar Pradesh; *The Journey of Social Change*, a photobook of the installaton of statues by BSP. Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag, Uttar Pradesh, April, 2003.
2. *Hindustan*, 21 September 1998.
3. *Samajik Parivartan Ke Liye Sangharsh Karne Wale Mahapurushon Ka Samman*. Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag, Uttar Pradesh, year not available.
4. Interview with Babulal Bhanwra, village Shahabpur, Dt. Allahabad, 26 January 2004.
5. Interview with K. Nath, Dalit writer, Allahabad, 12 May 2005.
6. Ibid.

Chapter 1

New Narratives of Dalit Politics

There was once a king who had four wives. None of them had any children. In time, the youngest queen became pregnant. This made the other queens very jealous. When it was time for the queen to deliver, the king had to be away from the palace. He hung up a bell near the queen's bed and told the other queens to ring the bell as soon as she had given birth.

The other queens, out of jealousy, did not heed his instructions. When the new mother fell asleep, after giving birth to twins, the other queens killed the two newborns putting some bricks and stones in their place. They then rang the bell to inform the king that the queen had given birth. The king was livid when he heard that the queen had produced stones and bricks. In a fit of rage he threw her out of the palace. The queen took shelter in the forest and took up the job of scaring away crows that destroyed crops in the fields of rich people (*kauwa hankni*).

The wicked queens had told the killers to kill the two children. The killers took pity and buried them in the forest where they grew into two beautiful trees covered with flowers. Whenever any person came near them to pick flowers, the trees grew a little higher just out of reach of the person. One day their mother, the *kauwa hankni*, came near them. As soon as they saw her they both bent down and embraced her lovingly. This broke the spell cast on them and they once again became princes. Together with their mother they went to the palace and claimed their rights to the kingdom.

(This story was presented in the form of a play by the students of Ambedkar Vidyalaya, a school for Dalit children, located in the village, Shahabpur, 15 km from Allahabad. The school is run by a Dalit activist named Babulal Premi. The play was put up on 26 January 2003, in a function that had been organized in the school premises. Kamalakant Gautam, State Secretary, and Member of the Legislative Council of the BSP, was the chief guest. After the play, Mr Kamalakant Gautam commented that the children of the *kauwa hankni* were the new heroes of the Dalit movement who had been deprived of their birthright by the conspiracies of the upper castes and who were now fighting to get it back.)

The new narratives of Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self-respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression. The language too is filled more with cultural and social symbols and metaphors than with economic ones. It borrows heavily from folk culture and is a mixture of power, authority, dissenting folk culture and the popular memory of Dalits. When it is expressed through their own cultural symbols, it evokes their collective memory and constructs their identity in a new way. The use of the cultural idiom through these narratives is seen to facilitate the acquisition of political power through capture of state power. A political consciousness is being created among the target group, which has significantly helped in their mobilization. In this process, their consciousness becomes not only cultural but also political. The BSP has been successfully using these new narratives as influential tools for mobilizing the communities that form its electoral base. It would be interesting to investigate the sources of these narratives, the resources from which they are drawn, the main constituents of these narratives and the language in which they are written. Why and how they have become so effective is another interesting area of study. This chapter will delve into some of these issues.

Since the early years of Indian society, the Brahminical mode of composing, defining and interpreting history, culture and stories became the basis of the formation of narratives in the form of puranic stories, *vrat katha*s, folklores loaded with Brahminical values, ritual stories and songs. Through this the Brahmins created a Brahminical mindset and a normative frame of reference by which the Dalits were accorded an inferior position. To counter such oppressive historical constructions, the subaltern groups have continuously engaged in communicating their own stories, which they had composed in various forms. They have also constructed a plethora of symbols which are used as tools for empowerment in response to the urge to acquire self-respect. This is not merely to deliver oral accounts or to construct a genealogy of lands and events but to restore order in the world as perceived by them. The creation and compilation of contesting histories and narratives are ongoing processes that are transmitted to the Dalits at the grass-roots level in the form of stories, riddles and genealogies. These are the major features of Dalit orality that are found in various folk languages in North India like Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Braj, Bundeli and so on. The sources from which the legends and heroes are drawn are origin stories, *jati katha*s, folklore, the nationalist movement and socio-political movements.

Constituents of Narratives

The stories that describe the origins of various lower castes emerged as a popular form of 'protesting narratives.' This form of narrative, on the one hand, integrates caste narratives with the Brahminical narrative, but in this process also creates its own space and uses this space to express dissent. Different from academic 'history,' these stories liberate marginalized groups of Indian society and enable them to enter into the meaningful domain of knowing, inventing, creating and telling a past that is able to dialogue with the present (Narayan and Misra 2004: 26)

Most upper and middle castes in Indian society also have their own caste stories. Called *caste purana*s, these stories are a part of the oral tradition, but have also surfaced in written form at various times. As many sociological studies in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have shown, the narratives of the higher castes are based on upper-caste religious texts called the *purana*s.[1] The *caste purana*s create a privileged social space for the higher castes, which allows them to legitimize their philosophy. The stories are replicas of puranic stories and rhymes in which each caste links itself with great mythological *rishi*s and *muni*s. These *caste purana*s do not follow the pattern of the pure puranic narrative system, but attempt to snatch space within the Brahminical metanarratives by assuming a parodic form (Narayan 2002: 161).

The stories of the lower castes are commonly referred to as *Jati biradari ki katha* or *jati katha*. They are parallel to the *caste purana* of the upper castes (Das 1977: 10) and are the creations of the castes themselves, usually based on their folklores, which express a social order that runs against the order described in the metanarratives. One finds in them definite protests against Brahminical forms. An attempt to go for an alternative content is visible in the parallel histories of the lower castes, although at many places the tendency to accept those forms is also visible. This appears to be mainly because of their ambiguous attitudes towards the Brahminical and puranic narratives. The extent of ambiguity varies with different deprived castes on account of their changing social, economic, political and cultural conditions. Thus, the history created and recorded by those castes that have been pushed outside the history narrated by the dominant sections has evolved differently in terms of content and arrangement of text.

Rather than having mere entertainment value as is sometimes supposed, these *jati katha*s function as vehicles for dissenting values, cultures and memories and also as instruments of social control. They prepare the

mental ground for depressed communities to take the path towards identity construction. The symbols, heroes and histories of these stories articulate the aspirations, dreams, ambitions and the urge for the reconstruction of the identities of these groups and communities. The words, metaphors and the entire imaginative structure of the stories may reveal to the discerning eye, the subjectivity of the narrator, which reflects elements of identity consciousness. These stories, as narrated by the concerned communities, are not mere fiction but existential articulations that reflect cultural contexts in which their identity can be located. However, they are not always coherent but are usually fragmented and episodic. A story may be found to be a product of many stories and folklores like folk tales and ballads depicting both the origin and evolution of that community and its social needs and struggles.

MULTIPLE HEROES

The caste stories of Dalits may either be related with the origin of the caste or centred around heroes of that caste. Origin stories are descriptions of the circumstances in which various castes originated. The purpose of these stories is to identify the social space of that caste in the Hindu social set up. Almost all the stories try to link themselves with the Great Tradition, but they also create and analyse the situational matrix within which that caste had been pushed to the outermost orbit of the social structure by the upper castes. For example, the Chamars narrate the story of the origin of their caste in the following manner.

> There was once a Raja who had two daughters, Chamu and Bamu. Each of them had a son of great physical power. One day an elephant died in the palace grounds. As the Raja did not wish to cut its body to pieces, he inquired if there was anyone strong enough to carry the carcass away and bury it. Chamu's son performed the task, whereupon Bamu's son declared him an outcaste. The desendants of Chamu came to be known as Chamars. (Briggs 1920: 16)

The Chamars try to glorify their caste by linking important historical persons to it. Bhullar, a fifty year old semiliterate Chamar living in Shahabpur, a village on the outskirts of Allahabad, UP; and a follower of the Ravidasi sect, a sect very popular among the Chamars of eastern UP and Bihar, said, "Charmavansh (Dynasty of Chamars) have ruled over the entire subcontinent for the last 178,000 years. According to the genealogical tree, Shambook, Supak Das, Ravi Das, Harish Das, Mordhwaj,

Eklavya and so on belonged to the Shudra *gotra*. Even though Eklavya has often been considered to be a Nishad, he was also a Shudra. That is why all the *rishi muni*s were born in the Shudra caste. There were only one or two *rishi*s from the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes but the rest were Shudras. Valmiki and Parashar were Shudras too as was King Ashoka. His pillar is still alive *(ajar amar)*[2]

In eastern UP, the Pasi community traces its origin to *Rishi* Parashuram, a mythical Brahmin saint who was reputed for his militancy. The community members claim that they were born from the sweat of Parashuram but he did not give them his name or accept that they were born from him. The manner in which this story is narrated brings out, on the one hand, the Pasis' desire to link themselves with the Great Tradition and, on the other, their critique of Brahminical norms both for not giving them their rightful position in the social domain and for causing their downfall by conspiring against them. Fifty-five-year-old Khichrilal Pasi, living in Pasiyapur, also in Shahabpur, Allahabad, narrates the myth in the following manner,

> One day, when Parashuram's mother was in the process of delivering Parashuram in the *sauri* (maternity room), a butcher called Kamrukamachha started leading away 1,600 cows from the village. The villagers complained to Parashuram's mother, who expressed helplessness since she was in the act of delivering a baby. By then Parashuram Maharaj emerged from his mother's womb with the umbilical cord tied around his waist. He ran after the *kasai* (butcher) and started fighting with him. He fought bravely, some-times throwing him away and sometimes turning cartwheels himself. By this time he was sweating profusely. He shook his head to remove the sweat and when the beads fell on the ground, five Pasis emerged from them. These Pasis also joined in the fight and killed Kamrukamachha. Parashuram then released the cows and brought them home. The five Pasis requested Parashuram to take them home with him since they had had nothing to eat. Parashuram replied that his umbilical cord had still not been cut so he was incapable of looking after them. The Pasis then asked him what they should eat. Parashuram replied that they should eat the rear end of the pigs that were passing by after dipping it in sandalwood paste (chandan) to purify it. The Pasis acquired great strength by following the advice of Parashuram. There was no match for them in the entire country. One day Lord Vishnu was passing by on an elephant along with Narad Muni. On seeing the Pasis playing nearby, Narad angrily asked them what they were doing. The Pasis, in return, pulled the tail of the elephant, which came loose in their hands. Narad then remarked to the Lord that these people were very strong and would soon control the earth if not stopped.

> A few days later Narad Muni, who happened to be a Brahmin, came by alone just as the five Pasis were about to eat their meal of pig's meat. Narad scoffed at them for eating raw meat and advised them to make it tastier by adding salt to it and cooking it. Being simple minded, the Pasis took Narad's advice and started cook-ing the meat and adding salt. Since then the strength of the Pasis decreased. Narad then said to Lord, now we will see what the Pasis can do. When the Pasis tried to pull the elephant's tail loose after that, they were unable to do so since their strength had decreased.[3]

Like the Pasis who identify themselves with an upper-caste *rishi* and, in the process, forge a link with the Great Tradition, the Gihar caste, an artisan community whose caste-based profession is to carve statues out of stone, links itself with Maharana Pratap Singh and Prithviraj Chauhan (two famous Rajput kings of the medieval period) in its caste history. Stories narrating these connections were circulated in their oral tradition, which were then converted into the printed form by Hiralal Gihar, one of the few educated members of this caste. He wrote his caste history called the *Bharatiya Adivasi Gihar Itihas*, according to which the Hindus had faced large-scale oppression under the Mughals. Babur had ordered their assets to be taken away, their temples desecrated and converted into mosques and their tufts of hair, the symbol of Brahminism, chopped off. When the battle of Haldighati was fought between Maharana Pratap and the Mughals, the soldiers belonging to the Sisodiya Kshatriya caste, who fought along side Maharana Pratap, were actually Gihars. The soldiers who fought along with Prithviraj Chauhan against Muhammed Ghori in the plains of Tarain too were Gihars. These two battles rendered the Gihars homeless, forcing them to start living in the forests, close to nature. They sustained themselves on the honey and the herbs that the forests provided (Nath 2000: 4).

These stories are being reinterpreted by some groups of Gihars who are a part of the mainstream Dalit movement that glorifies marginalized communities as Dalits under the Ambedkarite ideology. These stories emphasize the idea that the Gihars had to experience gross injustices as a Dalit caste, despite being linked with Maharana Pratap and Prithviraj Chauhan. They now claim that although they had played a major role in history and had sacrificed their lives for the nation, they did not get their proper due because of their marginalized social position. This interpretation gives impetus to the Gihar project of creating a homogeneous Dalit narrative of all the lower castes of UP (ibid.: 4).

Another example of lower castes associating with upper-caste heroes can be seen in the case of Khatiks, an important Dalit caste whose members are spread widely across UP. Khatik settlements, called *khatikana*,

can be found in almost every city, town and village of this region. Khatiks are also called Mewafarosh although they now prefer to be known as Sonkar since it sounds more respectable. To keep up with the demands of their present socio-economic condition, the urban Khatiks have tried to search for their caste heroes in their oral traditions. After intensive research into the origin of their caste, they have succeeded in associating themselves with Mahatma Durbalnath and Sant Kirorimal, two upper-caste saints mentioned in Hindu religious texts. Yatindra Sonkar of Kanpur, among the few educated persons in his community has created his caste genealogy with a great deal of hard labour and research. He has also penned plays, and written stories and novels around this caste genealogy to popularize it among the Khatiks at the grass-roots (Nath 2000: 3). This has given the caste members a new feeling of respectability and identity and they have begun to celebrate the anniversaries of these heroes as occasions to enhance their caste glory.

The Bhangi caste is one that lies in the bottom-most rung of the lower castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy. It is considered to be a highly polluting caste since its members are usually engaged in sweeping and cleaning. They are known by various names in different states, for example in Punjab they are known as Chuhra; while in UP, Bihar and Rajasthan, they are known as Bhangi, Mehtar, Jharmali, Halalkhor, Raut, Hela, Dom, Domar, Basor and so on. In Punjab, some of the Chuhras who have adopted Sikhism are known as Majhabi and Rangreta. The UP Bhangis have started associating themselves with Balmiki, the writer of Ramayana, which is highly revered by the upper castes, in their oral tradition. They have started calling themselves valmikis and also celebrate the anniversary of the author on a date that they have themselves decided (ibid.: 4).

The Pasis too, besides linking themselves with Parashuram, have discovered and invented a number of caste heroes from the medieval period, who, they claim, played significant roles in the history of the nation and in the freedom movement. These caste heroes were used to elevate their caste pride and caste glory in the region to which they belonged. The story of Bijli Maharaj is very popular among the Pasis of Lucknow, Bahraich, Barabanki, Jaunpur and Allahabad. Suhaldev Pasi is another Pasi character popular in Bahraich. The legend of Daldev Maharaj is popularly narrated among the Pasis living in Rae Bareli, Jaunpur and Allahabad. The story of Baaledeen is circulated in Kaushambhi and Allahabad, while Beera Pasi’s story is common in Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and Allahabad. In the area of Oudh, the story of Daldev Pasi and his brothers, Baldev and Kakoran, who are believed to have belonged to the Rae Bareli district is highly popular (Choudhury 1997: 51).

For the Chamar community, it was a matter of great pride that Sant Ravi Das belonged to their caste. Sant Ravi Das is one of the most popular leaders of the Bhakti period and is considered the icon of all Dalit castes. The Chamars, however, claim that he is a hero of their own caste. Although this caste is at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, it is also the most politically enlightened one. This caste associates itself with Ambedkar, who was a Mahar from Maharashtra, a caste similar in position to the Chamars of UP. Other heroes with whom they associate are Sant Kabir and Gautam Buddha (Nath 2000: 3).

Dhanuk is another small untouchable marginalized community, which explored its oral traditions in search of a hero with whom it could associate itself, in order to consilidate its case identify. The Dhanuks found such a hero in Pannadhai, who was a maid in the palace of Maharaja Rana Sangha of Chittor and looked after Kunwar Uday Singh, the heir to the throne. According to this legend, Pannadhai sacrificed the life of her only son, Chandan, to save Uday Singh, and, thus, prevented the kingdom of Chittor from passing into the hands of its enemies. Pannadhai has now become the caste hero of the entire community which is mainly concentrated in Kanpur, Etawah, Farukhabad, Mainpuri, Etah and Ferozabad. Pannadhai's memory is commemorated by organizing celebrations and other activities annually (ibid.: 4).

Dalit communities also extract their heroes from other genres like folklore. These folklores are often love stories that glorify the protagonist's socio-cultural role in history. The hero of one such story is Sobhnayaka Banjara who is the central character of a popular story of the Banjara caste in north Bihar and the area bordering Nepal. The Banjaras of Gonda and Bahraich in UP also regard Sobhnayaka as their hero. In this love story, which is set in the medieval period, the hero goes to distant places on business with other members of the community. He achieves success despite many obstacles on the way and he also overcomes opposition and hurdles to unite with his lover (Das 1995: 34). Similarly, we find the story of Dina-Bhadri of the Mushahar caste (a semi-nomad community which survives on rats) in the Mithila region of Bihar. This story revolves around the social struggles of two brave brothers, Dina and Bhadri, who defeated many armies of the higher castes in the medieval period. Other heroes from folklore, who the Mushahars claim as their originators, are Deosi and Savari. They are, popular in different regions. In the regions adjoining Pipri and Mirzapur of UP, the Mushahars are said to be a branch of the Kol tribe known as Cheru, and descendants of the legendary character Deosi. In the Gaya and Magadh regions

of Bihar, the myth of Savari connects the Mushahars with an ancient and almost forgotten people known as Savari or Seori. These three myths and the caste heroes associated with them are popularly circulated as ballads and legends.[4]

The Dusadh caste associates itself with three popular folk ballads of Bihar whose heroes are Reshma-Chuharmal, Sahlesh and Kunwar Vijaymal. The Dusadhs sing songs and commemorate the memory of their heroes through fairs and festivals. They have iconized these heroes by installing statues and forming socio-political organizations around them in Bihar and UP.

Among the caste heroes of the various Dalit communities, only some have the potential of being converted into symbols of identity. And these have become icons of the Dalit community as a whole. These heroes are now integral constituents in the elevation of the glory and self-esteem of the community. That is why whenever the BJP tries to reject folk narratives by comparing them with puranic narratives, the Dalits lodge strong protests that assert folk culture as their cultural resource. In an incident that took place in Lucknow on 24 September 1998, activists of the Ambedkar Vichar Manch organized a rally to protest against the cultural hegemony of the BJP. The BJP had been trying to propagate the concept of 'one nation one culture' by homogenizing all the folk cultures under one Brahminical Hindu culture. By nation, the BJP meant a nation based on Hindu cultural values as codified in the *Veda*s and the *Purana*s and the epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In this way, all the folk cultures from which the Dalit communities drew their caste heroes were negated. On one of the placards in the rally was painted the slogan 'Stop suppressing folk culture' (*Lok Sanskriti ka daman band karo*). Another placard said 'Down with cultural nationalism' (*Sanskritik Rashtravad Murdabad*). In the rally, the Dalits sentenced Dronacharya, the Guru of the Kauravas and Pandavas in the epic Mahabharata, to be hanged to death for not accepting Eklavya as his student because he belonged to a lower caste. If the cultural values that the BJP was trying to impose prevailed, the sacrifice that Eklavya made for his Guru would be glorified since he did not protest against the unjust treatment meted out to him by Dronacharya simply because he was born into a lower caste. This version was subverted by the Dalits who projected Eklavya as being exploited by Dronacharya because of his low birth. That is why they held a mock trial in which Dronacharya was ordered to be hanged. In the same mock trial the judge sentenced the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, to be hanged for being anti-Dalit.[5]

Apart from caste and cultural icons, the Dalits of UP also explored the national movement for heroes and still use these heroes in their ongoing efforts towards political mobilization. In Dalit oral traditions, elite nationalist heroes such as Kuar Singh, Tantya Tope and Nana Saheb do not figure. The people who do figure are Chetram Jatav, Ballu Mehtar, Banke Chamar, Vira Pasi, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, her husband Makka Pasi, Avantibai Lodhi, Mahaviridevi, Matadin Bhangi and Udaiya Chamar, who were martyrs born in the lower strata of Indian society. The Dalits claim that Udadevi and her husband Makka Pasi were the only married couple in world history to have laid down their lives for their country during the 1857 Revolt at Sikanderabagh in Lucknow. The Dalits contend that not just the Pasis but the entire country should feel proud of their contribution to the making of independent India (Pasi 1996: 13). They also claim that the first person to inspire the revolt against the British in 1857 was Matadin Bhangi, who instigated Mangal Pandey, the first revolutionary of the elite nationalist narrative, to revolt against the British in the Barrackpore Cantonment (Nath 1998: 1–24). Stories about these heroes are circulated, folk songs are composed, statues are erected and festivals and fairs organized to commemorate them.

These heroes have become part of the folk tradition of the region to which they belong. For example, the story of Udaiya Chamar is popular in the Aligarh region. In the region adjoining Muzaffarnagar, the Dalit hero, Mahaviridevi, is a part of the oral tradition. Jhalkaribai is popular in the Bundelkhand and central UP region. The myth of the 'Courageous Lady' (*Virangana*), Udadevi, is popular in the central region of UP, while in the region adjoining Madhya Pradesh (MP), that is, Baghelkhand of UP, Bundelkhand of UP and MP, the Chitrakoot region of UP and MP and in the territorial region of Allahabad that touches Madhya Pradesh, the myth of Avantibai Lodhi has emerged as a popular folk story among the marginalized Dalit communities. From all these heroes in the oral narratives of the 1857 Rebellion, the BSP, with its aim of building up the image of Mayawati, projects a few women heroes like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Mahaviridevi and Avantibai Lodhi as heroes of the entire community. During its rule in UP, statues of these heroes were erected at various places in UP. A statue of Jhalkaribai has even been installed in front of the fort of Rani Laxmibai in Jhansi. Fairs and festivals are organized and caste organizations have been formed under their names.

The language of the new narratives that are used for the political mobilization of Dalits by the BSP at present is heavily interspersed with local

myths, legends and cultural symbols and is, thus, different both from the language used by the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956 and the language used by Kanshi Ram in the initial period when the BSP was launched. These two languages were similar to the language used in the Maharashtrian Dalit movement in that they were heavily based on the socio-economic issues of the Dalits and on Ambedkarite thought which had been transmitted in toto to the Dalits at the grass-roots level. The language developed by the BSP later was more innovative and creative, flavoured with the local culture of the Dalit community, its collective memories, myths and histories. The questions raised were the same as the ones raised earlier but they were spiced with the cultural environment of the region. This made it easier for the people to understand and relate to these issues rather than when they were addressed in the hard political language of other political parties.

In the next chapter we will analyse how the political orality of the BSP was formed and how the print media is used for this purpose.

Notes

1. In Brahminical literature, *purana* means both *itihas* (history) and stories. See Veena Das (1977: 10).
2. Bhullar, Godam Patti, Shahabpur, recorded on 8 February 2003.
3. Khichrilal Pasi, Pasiyapur, Shahabpur, recorded on 10 February 2003.
4. Field diary of Dhananjay, Deshkal, November 2004.
5. *Hindustan*, Lucknow 25 September 1998.

Chapter 2

Formation of Political Orality and the Role of Dalit Print

Once there was a bird catcher. He used to spread nets in the forest for trapping birds. Once, the birds that got caught in his net held a meeting to decide how to escape from the trap. They resolved to unite and apply their strength together to fly away with the net. They did so, and flew away to a far-off place where their other friends helped them to cut the strings of the net and become free. In the history of the forest this was not the first time that animals had escaped from traps laid by hunters, but, in this case, these birds circulated the story of their escape to other animals, so that they too could apply the same method.

—G.P. Madan, 5 January 2005
Allahabad

(While narrating this story, G.P. Madan, a Dalit writer, emphasized that the Dalits too should write their stories and circulate them among other marginalized people.)

If one follows the trajectory of the emergence of Dalit consciouness one sees that their mobilization began with the production of popular literature by the literate sections of the community in order to sensitize the masses to their protest (Schwartz 1997: 179). For this, they had to interpret myths, history and past from a 'Dalit' point of view because it was only by becoming an interest group within India's body politic that they could claim special privileges for themselves in the form of affirmative action by the State (Narayan 2001a: 3926). One of the ways of going about it was to publish their own literature, which contained legends and myths glorifying lower-caste heroes. It is difficult to say whether these legends and myths were originally in the oral form which was later converted into the printed form or whether they were orally disseminated among the Dalits at the grass-roots level from the printed

form. Investigation into their evolution shows that after the emergence of print culture in the form of Dalit newspapers and popular booklets written by Dalit activists and organic intellectuals these stories became more pervasive among the common people (Narayan and Misra 2004: 21). These popular booklets and newspapers were written and published by the Dalits themselves from small towns in UP and were used to transmit information to the literate sections of the population at the grass-roots level. Through the medium of orality, these also reached the illiterate sections, thus expanding the mass base of these myths and legends (Narayan 2001a: 3923).

Transmission through Print

The Dalit movement started in Maharashtra around 1877 through the efforts of Jyotiba Phule, Gopal Baba Balankar and B.R. Ambedkar. And from the very beginning, publication and propaganda received top priority. Phule started a newspaper called *Deenbandhu* on 1 January 1877, which subsequently proved to be quite influential. Between 1910 and 1930 there were nearly fifty newspapers published by Dalits all over Maharashtra, of which *Bital Vidhwansham*, *Son Vanshiya Mitra*, *Nirashrit*, *Hind* and *Nagrik* are well known. Dr Ambedkar himself edited important newspapers like *Janata* and *Mooknayak*. In the Hindi-speaking region, the one person who played the role of a yeoman in raising the consciousness of the lower castes through education and print culture was Swami Achhutananda. Born in a Chamar family in village Saurikk in Farrukhabad district of UP, his sparkling intelligence allowed him to gain command over Hindi, English, Urdu, Gurmukhi, Sanskrit, Gujarati, Marathi and Bangla at a young age. His awareness of the problems faced by the lower castes led him to join the Arya Samaj, a Hindu religious organization that was dedicated to the uplift of the marginalized by granting them the right to use upper-caste cultural symbols like the sacred thread *janeu* and reading the *Veda*s. Since this process was actually strengthening the upper-caste cultural hegemony, Swami Achhutananda left the Arya Samaj and initiated the Adi Hindu movement in UP in 1922. He propounded a coherent philosophy for the movement. This philosophy was based on the Bhakti literature composed by Bhakti saints of the medieval period like Sant Kabir and Sant Ravi Das, who were also poets and writers. He was also influenced by the Dalit movement of Maharashtra and was in constant correspondence with the leaders of the movement.

Swami Achhutananda was the first person in North India to set up a press and start the publication of a daily called *Achhut* in 1924 followed by *Adi Hindu* in 1928. Dr Ambedkar was highly appreciative of Swami Achhutananda's social, educational and political efforts in the uplift of the Dalits of North India.[1] In 1934, a Hindi weekly magazine called *Samata* was launched from Almora by Munshi Hariprasad Tamta. These pre-independence Hindi newspapers not only conveyed the philosophy of liberation from social castigation, but also established the significance of print media in Dalit mobilization and identity formation (Bechain 1997: 251). Henceforth, the print media become a great driving force in communicating the plight of the Dalits and also in finding the ways and means for their emancipation. It became a potent mode for the representation of the arithmetic of power and politics, which was later used extensively.

Many more newspapers and magazines were launched both before and after Independence from various places of UP. Some important newspapers and magazines can be seen from Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Important Dalit newspapers and magazines

Names	*Year of Commencement*	*Editor*	*Place*
Achhut (newspaper)	1917	Swami Achhutananda	Delhi
Adi Hindu (newspaper)	1928	Swami Achhutananda	Kanpur
Samata (weekly magazine)	1934	Hari Prasad Tamta	Almora
Parivartan (magazine)	1950	Swami Ajudhyanath Dandi	Aligarh
Shoshit Pukar (weekly newspaper)	1966	Not mentioned	Bulandshahar
Zamin ke Tare (magazine)	1962	Sewaram Mahashaya	Aligarh
Samta Shakti (weekly newspaper)	1972	Mohandas Naimisharay	Meerut
Nirnayak Bheem (monthly magazine)	1977	Dr Kawaldhari	Kanpur
Lok Chinta (weekly newspaper)	1978	D.R.S. Azad	Bulandshahar
Bahujan Adhikar (fortnightly magazine)	1981	Mohandas Naimisharay	Meerut
Bheem Bhumi (weekly newspaper)	1982	R.K. Gautam	Bulandshahar
Pragya Sahitya (magazine)	1995	O.P. Valmiki	Farookhabad

Sources: Bechain (1997: 252–64) and Baudh (2003: 38).

It can be surmised from Table 2.1 that the majority of these newspapers and magazines were published from various small towns and districts

in UP. This signifies that Dalit consciousness has gradually begun to gain momentum amongst numerous Dalit communities in different parts of UP. The newspapers and magazines became an agency for transmitting the need for equality and liberation to the members of their communities and played a pivotal role in horizontally disseminating the cry for Dalit assertion. They helped in the formation of the literate section of the Dalits. They were the opinion makers, the community leaders and the social activists. These newspapers were published daily or weekly and the magazines were published fortnightly or monthly. Although the exact figures of their circulation were not available, it can be said that they ranged between 1,000 and 10,000. For example each edition of the fortnightly magazine, *Bahujan Adhikar*, sold around 3,000 copies. The weekly newspaper, *Bheem Bhumi*, sold around 3,000 copies, while the publication of the monthly magazine *Nirnayak Bheem* varied between 2,000 and 3,000 (Gupta 2002: 5) The newspaper, *Bahujan Sangathak*, is the party organ of the BSP and plays an important role in constructing popular perceptions among Dalits. The number of readers is much larger than the number of subscribers since one copy is read and often read aloud to many people. Popular newspapers like *Majhi Janata* and *Bahujan Samaj*, are borrowed, read and discussed by many Dalits living in villages.[2] Figure 2.1 shows the various cities and towns in various regions of UP from where these newspapers and magazines are published. As can be seen from this map these publication centres are scattered all over the state and not concentrated in any one particular region.

Dalit popular booklets are another form of print medium that has helped in motivating the Dalits to develop a culture of struggle for social respect through reading, writing and publishing. These booklets put down in words myths and stories from their oral culture. They are printed on cheap news print (*akhbari*) paper and are about 50–60 pages in length. The printing standards are low and reflect the lack of money available for their production (Narayan 2001a: 3925). Despite the low production level, these booklets sell in large numbers at political meetings, fairs and *Chetna Mandap*s (small book stalls run by Dalit writers, located at various cities and small towns of UP like Balia, Bahraich, Etah, Etawah, Unnao, Urai, Allahabad, Lucknow and so on) (ibid.: 3926). During the last few years they have been written and published on a large scale, giving rise to a distinct class of authors and publishers who are educated and politically conscious. They occupy middle or higher middle-class status in society. For example Suresh Chandra Kushwaha, the author of *Arakshan Ke Hathyare* (Killers of Reservation) is an advocate in the

Figure 2.1
Region-wise distribution of Dalit publication centres in UP

Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

Allahabad High Court. Buddh Sharan Hans, author of *Kash Hum Hindu Na Hote* (If only we had not been Hindus), is a government officer. The author of the poetic life of Ambedkar, *Bhim Pachasa*, G.P. Prashant, is a teacher by profession. Mata Prasad, who wrote *Acchut Virangana*, a drama, is an Ayurvedic doctor (Narayan 2001a: 3924). The major objective behind these booklets is to make Dalits aware about their rights and duties and make them politically conscious. The agenda of this literature is guided by the desire to construct Dalit identity, to create a political language for mobilizing Dalits and to make claims and demands for social, economic and political privileges on the basis of the history of injustice meted out to them in the past. Table 2.2 lists some popular Dalit booklets from the archives of the Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Institute, Allahabad, India. Although it is not an exhaustive collection but the trend

in the number of booklets published over the decades can be observed (see also Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

Dalit popular booklets, newspapers and magazines

Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

Table 2.2

Decade-wise trend of publication of Dalit popular booklets

Decade	*Number of Publication*
1931–40	2
1941–50	2
1951–60	7
1961–70	56
1971–80	13
1981–90	26
1991–2000	114
2001–2006	69

Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

It can be gathered from Table 2.2 that out of a total of 289 booklets (from 1931 to 2006) collected, the publication of popular Dalit booklets increased considerably in the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. The

reason for this was that the Dalits had started feeling disillusioned with the Indian State as they had been excluded from the various developmental projects launched by it as also its various welfare schemes and benefits. All the benefits of the newly emerged state were being reaped by the upper castes and the elites who took advantage of their colonial education to appropriate important posts and portfolios. The rosy dreams, projected to the Dalits by politicians at the time of independence about their inclusion in the development of the nascent country, were found to be vanishing into thin air. This led to an increase in the publication of popular Dalit booklets to express their disillusionment with the State for not fulfilling the promises made to them at the time of independence. The growing consciousness among them due to education, literacy and the various efforts of the State made them aware of their right to a share in the development projects launched by the State. While, on the one hand, the State was making them aware of their rights, on the other hand it was also failing to fulfil their growing aspirations and desires. The one coherent elite story of nationalism that had been fed to the people through the various mediums of the state began to get ruptured with the creation of alternative dalit narratives about the role of lower-caste heroes in the nationalist movement.

The emergence of the BSP in 1984 gave further impetus to the publication of these booklets. The party appealed to writers to write booklets highlighting the problems of SCs, STs and OBCs that formed their electoral base. The literature was concerned with building a society based on equality, justice, freedom and fraternity. It aimed at instilling courage, self respect and generosity by exploring the history of relevant communities, especially the biographies of those saints and heroes who played important roles in the dalit struggle for liberation. Their basic agenda lay in the negation of Brahminic literature and the development of a counter-literature. The party believed that '*bahujan* literature' had to be created in order to bring about social change in the *bahujan samaj* and also to create a renaissance in cultured consciousness among Dalit readers (Narayan 2001a: 3924).

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report (a report of the committee set up by Indira Gandhi to look into the issue of providing protective discrimination to marginalized castes, which was eventually implemented in 1990) also led to the production of booklets in the 1990s in which the Dalit writers tried to justify their need for protective discrimination.[3] Through these booklets they started demanding protective

discrimination in the form of reservations in education and jobs. The logic posited by them was that while they had been ruling communities earlier the upper castes conspired against them and deprived them of their glorious historical status. They claimed that they had also made significant contributions towards the freeing and the building up of the nation but this had been overlooked after independence by the upper castes who deliberately kept them backward (Kushwaha 1993: 3). The past became the most potent site for such claims, a site which made it possible to embellish and interpret these claims through the present, intermingled with myth and fantasy so that a new perception could be created of a past that was pure, glorious and exclusive (Narayan 2001a: 3929). Thus most of these booklets written in this period were based on their own interpretation of history, which attempted to interpret Indian social history from the 'caste based view' and tried to evoke the glory of the lower castes (ibid.: 3927). Out of twenty-two booklets published by Lakshya Sandhan Prakashan, Bahraich, sixteen were based on history. Cultural Publishers, Lucknow, published thirty-two booklets on historical themes while fourteen out of twenty-two booklets published by Ambedkar Mission Publication, Patna were on historical themes (ibid.: 3926).

Print, Nationalism and Politics

After independence, a consciousness with respect to power sharing gradually percolated down to various strata of society. The post-British State launched various developmental and welfare schemes such as the Five Year Plans, schemes for the poor and marginalized, the abolition of the *zamindari* system and so on. Though the implementation of these programmes was not satisfactory, the propaganda, awareness campaigns and discourses on these attempts made by the welfare state reached the educated and socially and politically aware sections of the various strata of Indian society. This gave birth to an intense desire among the rich, educated and elite sections of various communities to make use of the benefits that the welfare state and democracy could provide. The aware, educated, mostly urban and salaried sections of the Dalits along with a slowly growing middle stratum of the Dalit population also gradually became aware of the fruits of democracy and the welfare State. They started using the print media to present the modern nationalist discourse from the Dalit perspective, which deconstructed the elite nationalist slogan of

'nation for all'. The news, features and reportage, which came out in newspapers published by the Dalits, tried to make the readers aware of the fact that the nation that was built on the blood and sweat of the Dalits, has been taken away from them and is now in the hands of the upper castes (Narayan and Misra 2004: 21). The production of this kind of narrative was necessary for the Dalit discourse to develop an argument in favour of getting an appropriate share in the power and wealth of the nation. This narrative was circulated through magazines and newspapers among readers who then become a part of this discourse. Discussions that centred around these issues were then transmitted to others, both literate and illiterate, through the secondary process of orality.

In their attempts to create an alternative narrative of the nationalist movement by rupturing the elite nationalist narrative, the Dalits meticulously explored their oral traditions to find heroes who could be positioned parallel to the elite heroes. The stories of these heroes were then disseminated within the educated section through the print media. These educated, in turn, then circulated these stories among the grass-roots sections through rallies, meetings and other forms of Dalit associations. Thus the stories that had once been a part of oral tradition were transferred into the printed form through writing and were then once again converted into the oral form. Now the print medium is also being used to create and disseminate the Dalits' own history of struggle in the creation of the nation. In this manner, the print medium was used to subvert the dominant narratives in Indian societies which kept them marginalized. The stories and legends about local heroes who played important roles in the national movement, such as Udadevi, Jhalkarbai, Mahaveeridevi and Avantibai, Pannadhai; and stories of epical dissenting heroes from the religious texts, like that of Eklavya, were also circulated through the print medium. These stories were picked up from among the people themselves, reinterpreted, packaged and disseminated once again among the common people through popular booklets and pamphlets. In addition to helping build their self-identity, this process helped in politically mobilizing the Dalits in favour of particular political parties, which then transformed into electoral votes. By constructing a popular history of injustices meted out to lower castes in the past, the popular booklets helped to create the power to mobilize Dalits in politics. These booklets provided logical support for acquiring more and more democratic benefits, justified policies such as reservations for the Dalits and finally, helped in the subversion of the dominant discourse by providing a strong basis for an alternative discourse (Narayan 2001a: 3933).

Education, Print and Writing

The activities of missionaries, private societies and a few individuals prepared the ground for those who advocated the promotion of education as a part of the duty of the British Government (Jha 1985: 21). This helped untouchables and lower castes in gaining entry into schools and acquiring education (Bharti 1992: 4). The British government also took note of their poor socio-cultural condition and, in order to alleviate the position of the lower castes, it prepared a list of backward and oppressed castes in 1934. In the same year, it passed the second India Act, which provided special benefits to untouchable castes and tribal communities. It was after the passing of this Act that there was a significant improvement in the condition of these communities. They were given the opportunity to read and write and were given reservation not only in jobs but also in politics. After 1936 there was an even greater improvement in their condition. It was at this time that Baba Saheb Ambedkar formed the Scheduled Caste Federation and, in July 1945, declared that the government had agreed to his demand for a separate state for the people belonging to SCs and STs who were scattered across the country (Ram 2004: 45).

Acquiring education and trying to integrate the Dalits in the mainstream was not, however, smooth sailing. Public schools were virtually closed to the Chamars (Briggs 1920: 237–38). Both teachers and pupils made it difficult for the lower castes to sit in classrooms. The lower castes, as a result, were not found in any significant number in the schools. But despite the stiff opposition and social constraints disfavouring the educational achievements of the untouchables and backwards, the number of untouchables successful in obtaining education in the United Provinces (the former name of UP) alone was 46,000 in the year 1917 (ibid.: 230). As mentioned in the earlier subsection, this section of educated Dalits attempted to reread history and analyse it from a different perspective. The coming of the print media further effectuated the articulation of their voices of dissent, along with the popularization of a different framework and a new analysis to understand the process of history. Contestations between various ideologies were evident in the literature published since the 1960s in India. The Dalits challenged the Brahminical hegemonic order by utilizing the print media; they further used it to counter the value framework erected by the dominant power groups. In other words, the print media was being utilized by this section to subvert the ideological and cultural structure persisting since ancient times. It helped in injecting new confidence and enthusiasm and enabling greater

mobilizational power. Moreover, the writings of the ruling class were always full of spaces, which could be exploited by the Dalits to counterpose their own ideologies. Further, the print medium gave cultural self expression to such groups through the efforts of the organic intellectuals of the community. This was understood by visionaries like Swami Achhutananda and the future Dalits followed rigorously the tradition that had been laid down by him.

It is noteworthy that certain Dalit castes that are yet to get entry into the written world have also not entered the discourse of political representational power. For the castes that have written records, it was the link with the written tradition that had been the turning point in their history of protest against social and cultural discrimination. But for every caste that had acquired political empowerment by associating with the print medium, there were many others who had not yet acquired the assertiveness to become a part of the democratic process of the country. These were the highly marginalized castes like the Chhipi (dyer), Mali (gardener), Badhai (carpenter), Lohar (ironsmith), Kumhar (potter), Nai (barber), Rangrej (dyer), Julaha (weaver), Dafali (community which sing songs at marriage ceremonies), Chikwa (butcher) and many other small communities. No organic leadership has emerged from within these communities and they have been languishing on the fringes without access to any of the rights that other assertive castes have enjoyed. It is not a coincidence that none of these castes has any written history or caste legend about its origin. They also do not have popular booklets written by people of their own community linking their caste with the nationalist narrative.

One caste which exemplifies how a written caste history can be an instrument in raising self-esteem and confidence among the caste members and can also help in their democratic participation is the Jogi caste, which also did not have a written caste history for many years. The Jogi caste is an extremely backward Muslim community whose caste-based profession is begging. This caste is mainly concentrated in the districts of UP like Faizabad, Pratapgarh, Jaunpur, Sultanpur and Banaras and constitutes nearly 40 per cent of the total Muslim population. Despite its large number, it remained deprived of all the benefits of development for a long period of time. The literacy rate of this caste was less than 1 per cent. This caste was looked down upon by all other castes since it followed its traditional profession of begging. Neither the government nor the elders of this community were concerned about the plight of these people. When the people of this caste went to government officials to claim some benefits provided to SCs they were turned away saying that Muslims did not

fall within the definition of SCs. Their pleas fell on deaf ears till the only organic intellectual of the community, Dr Moharram Ali, took the initiative of linking this caste with the Dalit movement led by the BSP. The first thing that he did was to collect the caste history of the Jogis from the older members. He then wrote a booklet narrating its caste glory and disseminated it among the illiterate Jogis to raise their self-esteem. When the other castes heard about the past glory of the Jogis they too felt impressed. This elevated the pride of the Jogis, built up their self confidence and helped in their identity assertion. This identity assertion was crucial for political mobilization and development. The history of the Jogis reveals that they were earlier a Hindu marginalized lower caste called Gosai. A roving saint (*jogi*) of this caste converted to Islam and the present day Jogis are his descendants. The *jogi* from whom the Jogi caste claims its lineage, could perform miracles. This made him very popular among the people who gave him alms as reward. His descendants continued to follow this profession, which eventually became the caste-based profession of the Jogis. This story was narrated by Dr Ali at all Jogi caste meetings or *sabha*s so as to transform the listeners into political entities. He then linked them with the BSP by claiming their Dalit origin, which he felt would be more effective for their uplift than their Muslim identity. The caste members claim that although they are Muslims by religion, culturally they are Hindus. Today, the Jogis have acquired the confidence to stand for elections for the post of Gram Pradhan in their villages and some have even won them (Bharti 1997: 71–72)

Construction of Narrative Types

The small newspapers and the local initiatives to develop a print culture among the Dalits were helpful in the creation of a reading and writing public. The versions, opinions and interpretations communicated through these newspapers and popular booklets percolated down to the common people and were translated during the oral discourse of activists and social leaders. The method through which the Dalits learn about their own past is referred to as *parh-likh ke*. Even the illiterate people say that they became aware of the suffering and oppression imposed on them by the dominant section through *parh-likh ke*. It is noteworthy that, to provide legitimacy to their personal experiences, they sometimes propose that they had acquired knowledge by *parh-likh ke*. The processes of construction, transmission and percolation of certain ideology-directed knowledge

about their identity is revealed by Dalits living in Shahabpur, a village near Allahabad, during the narration of their histories and through the narratives of the suffering and the oppression that they have faced for the last fifty years.[4]

While discussing the history of the Chamars, Pyarelal, aged seventy-six years, living in Godampatti, Shahabpur, narrated,

My name is Pyarelal. I would like to tell you about the history and the past of the Chamars. Earlier, long grass reeds used for sweeping the ground (*Jhakhars*) were tied around our feet to clean the ground on which we walked. But in case a few footprints got left behind, the upper castes would walk down the road only after the wind or an animal had cleared them away. When the children of our caste went to school, they were made to sit on the ground while the upper castes sat on mats. When they drank water they were cautioned not to touch the pot (*lota*) or it would become polluted.

Pyarelal went on to narrate the story of the origin of the Chamars.

Earlier Brahmins and Chamars were real brothers (*sagey bhai*). Once Rishi Ashtavakra (whose body had eight distortions), went to the house of the Brahmins for a religious ceremony in which a cow was to be donated to God (*godaan*). Ashtavakra was given a cow as a gift but he refused saying that he would not take anything. At this, some of the Brahmins started deriding both him and his distorted body. This angered the Rishi who cursed the Brahmins who were laughing at him, saying that since they were laughing at the 'bones and flesh' (*haar-maans*) of a person, they would have to work with *haar-maans* all their lives. These Brahmins then became Chamars whose caste-based profession is to skin dead animals and remove their bones.[5]

When Pyarelal was asked how he knew all these things he replied '*parh-likh ke*', although he was totally illiterate. It appears that knowledge about both the experiential past and the mythical past of the Chamars had been acquired by *parh-likh ke*.

In Godampatti, which is inhabited mainly by Chamars, the memory of an oppressive past has created a strong sense of identity and caste pride among them. This pride is also visible among the women as is evident from the narrative of an old Chamar woman called Jhuria who vividly described the oppression that she suffered when she was young and had worked in the Raja's (landlord of that region) house as a servant. When she, along with the other women, would go to the Raja's bungalow, the Rani and the other members of the household would not look at her face while talking to her. While grinding wheat and *makara* on the grindmill

(*janta*), a painstaking and laborious job, they were made to tie pieces of cloth around their feet so that their sweat did not fall into the flour. Bells (*jhanjhar*) were also tied around their feet to warn people of their arrival. After a hard day's work they were given 1.25 kg (*paanch pau*) of cheap cereals like *jau* or *matar*. They were not given any money or any of the produce of the gardens and fields of the Raja. When asked whether all this had happened to her or whether she had heard about them, Jhuria said that while these had happened to her, she also learnt about this through *parh-likh ke*. She herself was illiterate but her husband and children and other villagers had shared their knowledge with Jhuria and the rest of the women.[6] From her narrative it was evident that the type of narrative that is created in the Dalit printed form is transmitted at the grass-roots level, including women, through oral communication by Dalit leaders and activists.

Another semi-literate, forty-year-old man called Bhullar, who also belonged to the Chamar caste living in the Godampatti, said that earlier, when the Chamars would want to acquire knowledge, their tongues would be cut off by the upper castes who told them that the job of the lower castes was only to serve them. On being asked how he knew this, he said that he had read it in a book. To authenticate his point he showed me a popular Dalit booklet which narrated the story of Shambook, a lower-caste character in the *Ramayana* who had been killed by Lord Rama for reading and spreading knowledge of the *Veda*s. Bhullar added that despite the ban on acquiring knowledge, the Chamars developed their own *Veda*s called *Chamar Veda*s. According to him the Brahmins and the Chamars were the only two castes that had their own *Veda*s. It is interesting to note that among the upper castes a common form of insult to a Chamar who talks too much is 'What *Chamarved* are you chanting' (*kya Chamarved bak raha hai*). It appears that this sarcasm has been subverted by the Chamars by claiming that they have their own *Veda*s like the Brahmins. On being asked how he knew about the *Chamar Veda* he replied,

> We have all studied. We have all read books. We spend time in the company of *sadhu*s. We go to political rallies and caste meetings (*Sabha Samaj*). We buy books from there. We read plenty of books. All this is written in books. A member of the BSP, Lalji Premi, visits our village often and distributes books and pamphlets among us.[7]

From Bhullar's statement, it is very clear how knowledge has permeated through semi-literate people like Bhullar to illiterate people like Jhuria and Pyarelal. The meaning of *parh-likh ke*, as it is used by illiterate

people, emerges from the narratives of the persons mentioned earlier. The knowledge acquired by the semi-literates is transmitted and disseminated orally to the illiterate section as secondary knowledge, which then becomes first-hand knowledge for the latter. They can then confidently claim that they have learnt about the history of their people and their caste through the *kitab* (printed literature). His narrative reveals certain patterns. It creates homogeneity in popular Dalit mentality by destroying autonomy of thinking and imagination, and it also becomes the basis for the creation of unity and solidarity among Dalit communities.

The network developed by the print medium is very clear. It transmits experiential knowledge about individuals as well as the community and its collective past, which is available as popular and almost homogeneous narratives to the common Dalit population. Here the term *parh-likh ke* also contains knowledge acquired from oral communication. This becomes clear from Bhullar's statements that knowledge is also acquired in *sabha samaj* (Dalit political meetings), interactions with the more educated community leaders and from *sadhu*s or wise persons (*gyani purush*). Thus, this modern printed knowledge coexists with the traditional oral knowledge of the communities. Bhullar said that the new consciousness among the Dalits in society is only because of the contributions of Kabir, Ravi Das and Ambedkar. Associating themselves with Kabir and Ravidas helped them to acquire an image of a community with its own values, norms, rituals and culture. This lent them prestige in society and helped them to overcome the stigma of being an unclean caste. Ambedkar inspired them to be educated, which led them to acquire social prestige and emancipation from untouchability. According to Bhullar, people of the upper castes today, do not mind sitting with the Dalits and drinking tea with them only because the Dalits have been liberated to a great extent, from social stigma. Bhullar became emotional while talking about Kabir, Ravi Das and Ambedkar, saying that his only dream in life was to see the statues of these three great persons installed in his village.[8]

RECONSTRUCTION OF MYTHS

When a certain myth, legend or narrative is converted into print, many a time its dissenting nature is sharpened. This is because the writers who compose them are aware about the issues faced by the readers and they try to highlight these issues in the printed form. In one form of writing they try to extend the myths in such a manner that their dissent

against the hegemony of the dominant sections is brought out more forcefully, while in another form they try to subvert the existing meaning of the myth and interpret it as a reaction against Brahminical norms. The dissenting nature of these myths then acquires the potential of being used as instruments for raising political awareness among the population at the grass-roots level.

An example of an epical myth that has been extended in Dalit narrative can be seen in the case of the Bhangis. The educated Bhangis link themselves to the Brahmin school of thought by claiming to belong to the same lineage as Balmiki, the composer of the epic, *Ramayana*. Since he was a Brahmin, they too, consequently, are Brahmins. Books like *Main Bhangi Hoon*[9] and *Balmiki-Balmiki* (Balmikanand 1974) were written by Bhangis with the objective of educating their community about their caste stories and caste heroes. The books claim that the Mughals wanted to convert the Bhangis into Muslims, but when they protested they were declared outcastes and forced to do dirty jobs like sweeping and cleaning, which they still continue to do. Later, with the rise of the Dalit movement in UP, the intellectuals among them tried to establish Balmiki as a *Shudra* and as a result the Bhangis too were *Shudra*s. But one section, inspired by Ambedkar, deconstructed the myth of Balmiki by questioning how a *guru* of the Bhangis could have killed other Shudras (Balmiki was a dacoit called Ratnakar before his transformation into a rishi). They also questioned how a person who was grief-stricken on seeing a bird in the throes of death (described in the *Ramayana*), could kill other people. Despite these arguments, most Bhangis still continue to claim Balmiki as their caste *guru*. Their argument is that in Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, which is the version read by the upper castes, the killing of the lower-caste character, Shambook, by Lord Rama has been wilfully omitted whereas Balmiki mentions it in his ver-sion since he himself belonged to a lower caste.[10]

Balmiki's *Ramayana* projects Shambook as a great saint born into a lower caste. He used to meditate on the banks of the Godavari in Dandakaranya and preach to the lower-caste people. Lord Rama's kingdom was, once, struck by a famine. Saint Vashistha told Rama that the cause of the famine was Shambook, a lower-caste person, who has been reading the *Veda*s and imparting its message to other lower castes. Therefore, Shambook had to be killed to save the famine-stricken people. Rama was not prepared to do this heinous act, but on the advice of Vashishtha and other saints, he, with his brother Laxman, reached Shambook's ashram. Shambook on seeing Rama and Laxmana coming proceeded to

welcome them. Rama told the saint that he had broken the laws of Brahminism and hence had to be killed. Shambook replied that he had not committed any crime but had preached to people the lessons of devotion. Rama then said that the crime that Shambook had committed was greater than all other crimes, since the people of the lower castes were not entitled to Vedic knowledge as their work was only to serve the people of higher castes. So saying, Rama killed the great saint.

An old Chamar man, while narrating this story, identified Shambook with his own caste. He traced the origin of the caste to Gunishaiv, Shambook's father who belonged to the same caste.[11] The earliest mention of the story of Shambook in the written tradition of Dalits is in the book *Ram Rajya Nyay (Natak): Shambook-Muni Balidan* written by Swami Achhutananda around 1946 (published in 1950). But before that the story was popular in the oral tradition of the Shahabad district area in Bihar, as is evident from an unpublished manuscript named *Nirghina Ram Ka Ramayana*.[12] Other popular booklets like Anantaram Akela's *Shambook Rishi Ki Barahmasi*, which is a long poem, also narrate these stories.[13] Under the influence of Brahminical norms, the story was narrated in such a way so as to show that Shambook had been cursed by the gods that he would enter heaven only if he were killed by Lord Rama. That is why the events described in the *Ramayana* occurred in such a way that Lord Rama killed Shambook and ensured him a place in heaven.[14] But the increasing popularity of these booklets, along with increasing Dalit consciousness and the spread of BSP politics in UP, gave a new direction to its narration. The Dalit communities now raised Shambook to the level of a martyr with the aim of imparting education among Dalits, in the same part of UP that had seen a different interpretation earlier.[15] While Shambook, in Balmiki's *Ramayana*, was eager to go to heaven, contemporary Dalit narratives, written by politically aware writers and activists, adapted it according to their contemporary socio-political requirements. Their narrative is tailored to highlight the oppressive character of Brahminical religion, the corollary of which was the marginalization of the lower castes by depriving them of education, since the importance of education as an instrument for upward mobility had already been realized by them. The story of Shambook is an example of how an epical myth of the value-loaded, Brahminical religious and cultural text is reinterpreted and used in contemporary Dalit politics to homogenize all the lower castes through the creation of a common metanarrative highlighting the injustice of the upper castes.

The story of Eklavya is another tale from the epics that is reinterpreted and extended by the Dalits in their publications. This story is a part of the *Mahabharata*, the second epic popular among upper-caste Hindus. In the original story, Eklavya was an excellent archer whom Guru Dronacharya, the teacher of the Kaurava and Pandava princes, refused to accept as his student because of his low birth. Eklavya then went to the forest and learnt archery on his own by patiently practicing before a clay statue of Dronacharya which he had himself sculpted. On one occassion, when Dronacharya came to the forest with his students, his best pupil, Arjun, was defeated by Eklavya in a shooting competition. When asked to name his teacher, Eklavya politely mentioned the name of Dronacharya. The teacher, seeing Arjun's fame as the best marksman in the world being usurped by a lower-caste boy, asked Eklavya to cut off his thumb and give it to him as his *Guru Dakshina* (gift to the Guru).

This is the story found in the version of the *Mahabharata* mostly read by the upper castes. The orality which had evolved under the influence of Brahminical hegemony, which had earlier been circulated among the lower caste communities too, narrated this story with a strong emphasis on Eklavya's sacrifice for his guru. He readily agreed to cut off his thumb under the command of his teacher despite the injustice of the teacher in asking him to do so. His patience in practicing archery before a clay statue is also highly glorified in the Brahminical version.[16] However, today the Dalits, under the influence of the BSP, emphasize the fact that his thumb was cut off due to the conspiracy of the upper castes, who did not want their superior position to be threatened by a lower caste.[17] They also link the story with their urge to acquire education by reiterating that the upper castes do not want the lower castes to progress through literacy. Thus, like the story of Shambook, the Dalit interpretation of the myth of Eklavya has been reinterpreted and renarrated in their print media in a way that suits their socio-political requirements.

From these reconstructions of myths, it is evident that there is a strong tendency among the Dalits to link their myths with Brahminical myths, but the attempt is to give them an alternative reading which may also be regarded as replication in the form of dissent rather than as part of the process of Sanskritization.[18] The contradictions inherent in this process can also be perceived as in the case of the Bhangis, who, on the one hand claim to be the descendants of the Brahmin, Balmiki, while on the other, under the influence of the Ambedkarite ideology they project him as a Shudra and try to prove that Dalits too had wise men in their communities.

The Ambedkarite influence, which is visible in the critique of the story of Balmiki, is also visible in the other myths that are linked to Brahminical epical narratives, the stories of Shambook and Eklavya being examples. After the rise in Dalit consciousness, these two stories were recreated and renarrated to suit the needs of the new Dalit politics and then printed in popular booklets. When these were disseminated among the Dalits at the grass-roots level like Bhullar and Jhuria, a new orality developed that suited the political logic of the BSP.

These reconstructed myths that are printed in Dalit popular booklets also help in the creation of a new political orality that provide the political leaders a language of discourse. Dalit leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati use these stories in their speeches and discussions with common people and activists of the Dalit movement. These booklets have played a motivating role in the making of Mayawati's intellect too. They have helped her to gain information about the history of the Dalits, the present situation of the poor and oppressed, the life stories of different Dalit leaders, their views on the issues facing the people and their solutions to the same. This literature is the fountainhead of the intellectual prowess that is evident in her speeches and debates and, later, in her political addresses during election campaigns (Yad 2005b: 4).

When Kanshi Ram began his political career in Pune in the early 1970s by moblizing the Dalits of that region, D.K. Khaparde, an associate, provided him a large number of Dalit booklets that helped him understand the real issues facing the Dalits. In particular, Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste,' which had been circulated among common people in the form of cheap popular booklets, helped Kanshi Ram to concretize his language, logic and issues, which further helped him while presenting his ideas at seminars and discussions. He himself bought a large number of booklets to read and gain insight into the Dalit psyche. This also helped him to plan his future course of action in terms of developing the political language to address the Dalits at the grass-roots level (ibid.: 11). Activists and local politicians also rely on these booklets for formulating their political language so as to communicate with the grass roots and bring them under the influence of the BSP movement.

In the next chapter we will see how the Dalit heroes, who have evolved through popular literature, are given a visual image in the form of pictures and statues to further impact on the illiterate Dalits, and also how they become visual resources in contemporary Dalit politics.

Notes

1. 'Imagining Identities: A Catalogue of Dalit Heroes', Allahabad: Dalit Resource Centre: 13.
2. Ram Baran, village Shivpuri, recorded on 7 August 2001.
3. Analysis of booklets collected by Dalit Resource Center.
4. See the project report, 'Imagining Past: Memory, History and Development', G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 2003.
5. Pyarelal, Godampatti, Shahabpur', recorded on 8 February 2003.
6. Field diary, 'Women of Shahabpur', under project *Imagining Past: Memory, History and Development*, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 2003.
7. Bhullar, Godampatti, Shahabpur, recorded on 8 February 2003.
8. Same as Note 7.
9. Das, B. *Main Bhangi Hoon*, as quoted in K. Nath 2000.
10. Interview with Bauddhacharya S. Rao Sajeevan Nath, Dalit writer, on 21 March 2005.
11. Interview of Siyadin, a Chamar by caste, on 1 March 1995 at Gajipur, UP.
12. Nirghina Ram's 'Ramayana' is an unpublished manuscript written by a Dalit of Janaidih village of the Arrah District in Bihar in 1920. I got this manuscript from Sita Ram Pustakalaya, Janaidih.
13. Anantaram Akela, *Shambook Rishi ki Barahmasi* (a long poem), published from Kauriyaganj and other such publications brought out by Dalit authors.
14. Same as note 11.
15. Interview with Rampal, Gajipur, UP, on 4 May 2004.
16. Interview with Ramnath, Shringverpur, Allahabad, on 6 March 2002.
17. *Jai Jai Bhim Mahaan* and other pamphlets published on the occasion of *Veer Eklavya Pratima Anavaran Samaroh* at Allahabad on 20 April 1997.
18. See Karanth 2004 for further details on replication as dissent.

Chapter 3

Visuals, Cultural Performances and Myths

Now our music is not merely for entertainment but is an instrument in our fight for liberation. We are creating our own narratives and establishing our own heroes.

Suman Kumar, Dalit folk actor, Banaras, 20 October 2005.

Folk paintings, wall paintings, sculptures made of terracotta and clay, and cultural performances specific to each Dalit caste like the *Chamraundha* of the Chamars, *Pasiauwa* of the Pasis, *Dhobiauwa* of the Dhobis and so on, have always been part of the cultural resources of Dalits. These cultural forms reflect the socio-economic environment in which they exist and provide them with sustenance. Before the rise of Dalit consciousness, however, none of the lower castes had any visual representation of gods since there was no concept of a temple in a fixed place or form in the absence of an organized religion (Ilaiah 1996: 187). For them, gods and goddesses take all forms and shapes in a variety of places based on their daily interaction with nature, quite unlike the upper castes whose gods remain in temples somewhat alienated from real life (ibid.: 180). Further, they did not have any visual images of heroes since their heroes emerge from real life situations (ibid.: 179). Each lower caste had its own heroes who were revered in their oral tradition through ballads and narratives without having any visual form. Thus, the heroes and gods as also the cultural performances remained a part of the cultural resources of the lower castes, rather than being transformed into political resources. With the rise of Dalit political consciousness in UP and the emergence of the BSP, which has been using cultural resources for the political mobilization of the Dalits, the heroes of each caste are being converted into political resources by acquiring visual representation in forms that allow the illiterate and semi-literate Dalits at the grass-roots

level to easily visualize and then internalize them as symbols of their identity. In addition, these visual resources, which have taken the form of pictures on calendars, booklets, posters, statues, memorials and so on, are themselves helping to form myths and the memories accompanying these myths. Through the process of dissemination, these have now entered into their orality and collective memory in new forms and with new interpretations. As is well known the visual medium has a great impact not only because it is a vehicle for representation but also because it has the ability to inscribe itself on the memory of people. The BSP exploited this fully well. In its political strategies it created a cyclical relationship between myths, memories and visual resources to arouse the sense of caste pride and glory within the Dalits.

While searching for heroes, the first thing that the BSP intellectuals did was explore their narratives for local heroes who could fit into their logic. The next job was to give a face to these heroes. Sometimes the image appeared from the description of the hero within the narrative itself, but often they needed to create an image that would fit into the description when no photogragh or other visual source was available. In the recent past, statues of Dalit heroes like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai, Suhaldev and Bijli Pasi have been installed in many roadside crossings all over UP. Pictures of heroes like Ambedkar, Kabir, Ravidas, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and so on are also put up on the walls of Dalit houses in the form of posters or calendars. Like the upper-caste Hindus, some Hindu Dalits also hang up pictures of Hindu gods like *Ganesha*, *Hanuman*, *Durga* and so on. Buddhist Dalits have pictures or idols of Buddha in their houses. It is a noteworthy fact that calendars, posters with the images of Dalit heroes are found mainly in the houses of people living in cities or small towns.[1] In villages, pictures of Dalit heroes from their local myths are distributed free of cost during political rallies in the form of leaflets, pamphlets, handbills and so on. These are usually printed by local Dalit businessmen for politicians standing for elections from that constituency as part of their election campaign.[2]

Creation of Images

The image of Udadevi, which can now be seen all over UP, is not very old. It was created in 1953 when the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow, developed a museum based on the city history of Lucknow. A painter was invited who was asked to create an image based

on the description of Udadevi in the narratives collected by Professor K.N. Kaul, a botanist working with the Birbal Sahni Institute. In 1973, a Swatantrata Sangram Samiti, was formed which made a cement statue based on this image in the NBRI museum. The statue was not made very well and soon started cracking. Unskilled labourers were called in to fill in the cracks but in this process the image got distorted. Later when the BSP wanted to build her statues and print her portrait in posters and calendars they picked up this distorted image. That is why the statue in NBRI grossly differs from the roadside statues (Saroj 1997: 7).

Suhaldev is another icon of the Pasi caste popular in central UP. The first image of Maharaja Suhaldev was created in 1950 in Jittora near Bahraich in north UP by the local Congressmen. The Congress had organized a rally in Jittora to inaugurate a memorial of Suhaldev. Two local painters, Lalit Nag and Rajkumar Nag, were commissioned to paint the first picture of Suhaldev from their imagination. Later, Samaydeen of Gonda sculpted a statue of Suhaldev based on the painting made by the Nag painters, in which he was portrayed like a soldier astride a horse. This clay statue was later replaced by a cement one.[3] The local Raja of Prayagpur donated 500 *bigha*s of land and the Jittora Lake to the Suhaldev Smarak Samiti. Earlier the statue was placed in the park in the form of a memorial. Today however the place has been renovated to resemble a temple with the statue as the idol. Many people from near and far visit it to offer prayers. A priest has been appointed to conduct the prayers. Along with prayers, the devotees also take dips in the Jittora Lake, which is believed to have medicinal properties that can cure incurable diseases especially leprosy. They believe that the blessings of Maharaja Suhaldev have endowed the waters with these magical properties. More than the Dalits, in particular, the Pasis with whom Suhaldev was earlier identified, it is the upper castes who visit his shrine because of their belief in his magical powers.[4] He has now been transformed into a god and his myth is used more by the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for mobilizing the upper-caste Hindus of that region against Muslims than by the BSP for the mobilization of Dalits, although the BSP does sometimes mention the name of Suhaldev as a hero while mobilizing the Pasis. The RSS has installed Suhaldev's statue in Lucknow but this statue is markedly different from the one in Jittora that had been installed in the 1950s based on the painting by the Nag brothers. In the Lucknow statue, Suhaldev is shown as a valiant, military leader similar to the image of Maharana Pratap. He is wearing an iron armour, headgear, breeches, a shield in one hand with a sword tucked in his waist. On the other hand,

the statue in Bahraich depicts Suhaldev more as a medieval folk hero wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow.[5] Maharana Pratap is an upper-caste historical character propagated by the RSS and the attempt to carve Suhaldev in the Rana's image might be a reflection of their desire to homogenize the militant Hindu heroes and their iconographies. The residents of Bahraich, however, believe that the statue of Suhaldev in their town is the true depiction.[6]

Maharaja Bijli Pasi, a Pasi king who was supposed to have ruled over some regions of UP in the medieval period, holds an important place in the Pasi caste history. He is a symbol of caste glory for all the Dalits, proving that some of the lower castes were also kings. The ruins of his fort from where he ruled are still present in Lucknow, which has been converted into a memorial by the BSP. His victory day is celebrated there every year with great pomp and show for which a rally is organized where people from all Dalit communities congregate and cultural performances infused with political meaning are held before them. A statue of Bijli Pasi has been installed there in the image of a brave medieval warrior holding a bow and arrow. The story behind the creation of this image of Bijli Pasi is an interesting one. It was narrated by Nasimuddin Sidiqui, a former minister in the Mayawati government and close associate of Kanshi Ram. He said that when Kanshi Ram wanted the statue to be installed, he asked the sculptors to put together the best features of five of the Sikh gurus also revered by the Dalits, like Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Govind Singh, Guru Nanak and so on. If one were to observe the statue of Bijli Pasi carefully one can identify these features.[7] This image of Maharaja Bijli Pasi is also printed in calendars and posters, which shows him standing amidst the splendid ruins of his fort. Many Dalit houses, especially Pasi households, adorn their walls with it. R.K. Choudhry, one time minister in the BSP led government and presently in the SP, was the first to get this image of Bijli Pasi printed.

Installing statues of Dr B.R.Ambedkar in various places in UP was one of the most significant activities of the Dalit movement. A survey of the Azamgarh region of UP revealed that the installation of these statues is a matter of great pride for all the Dalit communities of the region that has gone a long way in constructing their identity.[8] Ram Sharan Ram, a Dalit youth living in that region, said that whenever a statue of Ambedkar is installed and garlanded on his birth anniversary, the chests of all the Dalits of that region swell up with pride.[9] An inspection of the statues of Ambedkar between Allahabad and Azamgarh showed that most of them have been copied from his picture in the Constitution of India, which

has since been reproduced in textbooks and calendars. In the villages that were surveyed, for example, Kotwa, Chauka Khurd, Bankat Bazaar and Belisa, it was found that most statues were made by local artistes, and hence, of poor workmanship. Despite this, there is homogeneity and the colour schemes are almost identical, the coat being navy blue and the trousers being white. The statues were installed by local, mostly Dalit, villagers with the financial and political help of local BSP MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) or MPs (Members of Parliament). The crossing in Azamatgarh in the district of Azamgarh, where a statue of Ambedkar was installed with the financial help of Barkhuram Barma, the local BSP MLA, is now known as Ambedkar Chauraha (crossing). Another statue at Jangopur village in Azamgarh was financially supported by Malik Masood, the BSP MLA of this area. A third statue at Kajara Mor near Jaunpur district was erected with the financial help of the village pradhan belonging to the BSP.[10]

What do these statues mean for Dalit communities and their political mobilizers? First, the visual mode is highly effective for creating memories since images impact immediately. This, along with the narratives around these statues, helps in creating memories among the Dalit communities of the great symbols of dalit politics. Second, it enables communities to gain self-respect since this is a sign of their acceptance in society. It elevates their sense of identity, self-esteem and self-respect with the reflected glory of the heroes. Gaining self-respect in public space acts an antidote to their everyday humiliation that they face at the hands of the upper castes at the grass-roots level. The statues installed by Mayawati carry a special meaning for the Dalit communities. When they enter the Ambedkar Park, where the statue of Dr Ambedkar is installed, they do so with the feeling that they have a right to the place. They use it like their own house, whether it is to sit, sleep or walk. They assert their right by saying that '*Bahanji* has constructed it' (*Bahanji banwaile hai*).[11]

It has often been alleged by anti-BSP forces, mainly the SP, that the installation of statues is an attempt to capture government land. This has led to conflict and violence whenever the Dalits try to put up a statue. At many places in Azamgarh the police has imposed an undeclared ban on the installation of statues of Dalit heroes, especially of Ambedkar, for this reason. The Thakurs or the upper-caste landowners and the middle-caste Yadavs of that region, who owe their allegience to the ruling SP, allege that the installation of the statues of Ambedkar by the Chamars and Pasis is a deliberate attempt to grab land. Omkar Singh, a fifty-year-old Thakur living in village Majhauwa of Azamgarh district, whose family

owns most of the land of that village, said heatedly that all the upper castes felt greatly angered when they saw the statues of Ambedkar and emphasized that they would not be responsible if they lost control and resorted to bloodshed.[12] Ram Nagina Yadav, another influential man of the village, teaching in the local primary school, who belongs to the Yadav community and supports the SP, voiced his skepticism about how installing statues of Ambedkar all over the place would help in the socio-economic development of the lower castes. Instead, he said that they anger the other castes and lead to rivalry, tension and violence in the village.[13] After the defeat of the BSP in UP in 2004 and the coming of the SP, the number of statues of Ambedkar has considerably decreased. The sculptors of Azamgarh also mention that, earlier, policemen bought statues of Ambedkar to replace any damaged ones in order to prevent any untoward incident from taking place between the members of the two parties who might blame each other for the breakage.[14] Thus the statue of Ambedkar, which is a constituent element in the identity construction of the Dalits, has also hurt the sentiments of the other castes living in that region. This has often led to violence and bloodshed as in 2002 when the Thakurs of village Majhauwa fired gunshots during the birth anniversary celebrations of Dr Ambedkar organized by the local BSP leaders.[15] During the reign of the BSP, when the installation of statues was a common event, such incidents occurred very frequently in different regions of UP.[16] In the erection of these statues, Mayawati, however, as has been mentioned earlier, saw the assertion of Dalit identity, which is why the construction of memorials and the installation of these statues was given top priority in the BSP's political strategy.

The BSP's Myth Making of Ambedkar and the Local Heroes of UP

The mapping of the process of myth making of Ambedkar in UP is an interesting one. Ambedkar was highly popular among the people of Maharashtra. As the maker of the Constitution of India he also gained popularity among the rest of the Indians, but in UP he was not as well known in the initial period of his active life. His name was popularized by Swami Achhutananda while he was involved in the Adi Hindu movement with which Ambedkar had a close association. The Poona Pact of 1932, one of whose signatories was Swami Achhutananda, further consolidated their friendship. That Ambedkar respected Swami Achhutananda is evident from the fact that he opened or closed his letters to the latter

with the word *Pranam* (a word to show highest regard in North India).[17] Ambedkar was also a close associate of Hari Prasad Tamta, the editor of *Samta*, a newspaper published from Almora during the colonial period. Thus, Ambedkar's fame spread in this region both orally through the discussions Tamta had about him with his friends and through print by the newspaper *Samta*, which regularly published Ambedkar's writings. Also, the educated Dalits of North India who were readers of newspapers had read about Ambedkar's role in the Poona Pact. These people began to subscribe to Dalit newspapers published from Maharashtra, which contained the writings of Ambedkar. In this manner they became aware of his opinions and writings and he thus gained reputation in this region (Bechain 1997: 145).

After independence, the RPI, which had been founded by Dr Ambedkar in Maharashtra, was expanded in UP. With the spread of the political discourse of the party, the myth of Ambedkar became a part of the collective psyche of the people. The image of Ambedkar that was carved in the mind of the common Dalit was one of a super human (*maha manav*), the messiah of the Dalits, and the one who would lead them towards enlightenment through education and development. The politics of the RPI began from western UP and extended towards Kanpur and its adjoining regions. Agra had started emerging as a hub for Dalit politics and Ambedkar addressed a rally here on 18 March 1956 which was attended by thousands of educated Dalits. Through such meetings, Ambedkar's fame further spread in the region. Initially, his photograph was popularized through posters and pamphlets published and distributed by the RPI for disseminating information about forthcoming meetings. The image was that of a suited and booted, westernized gentleman holding a copy of the Constitution in one hand. This image appeared to the common Dalits as a symbol of awareness through education and the fight for a better future. It also helped deconstruct the stereotypical notion of Dalits as being oppressed, suppressed and illiterate.[18]

After Dr Ambedkar's death his photographs were published in calendars and posters and his statue was erected. His photographs were also published on the covers of Dalit magazines, newspapers and booklets. This image reached the common and illiterate Dalits. When they heard his mythical eulogies in everyday political discours and occasional speeches, his image as a saviour and the architect of Indian democracy began to get ingrained in their minds. In some places he was referred to as an incarnation of the Buddha while in other places he was hailed as being more knowledgeable than the upper castes.[19]

When the BSP came within the political fray in UP in the mid-1980s, there were very few statues of Ambedkar in the state. The only ones that had been installed were by the government and semi-political and social organizations. After the launching of the BSP and its strategy of aggressive identity assertion, Ambedkar became a symbol of Dalit identity. His statues began to be installed by Dalit politicians and activists in various places in UP. But since Dr Ambedkar was not well known among the Dalits at the grass-roots level in this region unlike in Maharashtra where he is a household name, this image was thrust upon the people through the process of political dissemination. In the first phase of the BSP, before it understood the peculiar society and culture of UP in which saints, seers, epical heroes and local heroes occupy an important space in the minds of the people, both upper-caste and lower-caste, it tried to mobilize Dalits using the Ambedkarite language which was dominated by the consideration of social and economic factors (Narayan 2001: 144). In the latter phase, when the BSP truly understood its people, it had to change its political language from that of Ambedkar, like in the case of Maharashtrian Dalit movement, to one that was interspersed with the cultural symbols of the people of this region. Thus, its political strategy included putting up statues of local cultural heroes, saints and also of Dr Ambedkar, and organizing celebrations around their memories in the regions where they are popular so as to install them as important myths in their collective memory. In this strategy, Ambedkar and the local cultural heroes of this region were projected as being complementary to each other rather than as binary opposites. Table 3.1 shows the local heroes popular in different places of UP that were used by the BSP as symbols of Dalit identity.

As can be seen from Table 3.1, the BSP selected myths that were popular in particular regions to mobilize the people of that region. The myths are not merely small anecdotes or incidents about lesser known characters but long texts about persons who played significant roles in history and whose life stories could be used as inspirations to motivate and mobilize the communities concerned. The narratives selected were such that they facilitated the creation of visual texts and ignited the imagination of the viewers. The myths being used by the BSP for mobilizing Dalit communities were influential because of the urge of the communities themselves to gain self-respect and relocate their place in society. The myths thus serve as visual resources for political mobilization which the BSP is using most effectively.

Table 3.1
Subaltern myths identified for memorialization

	Name	*Caste*	*Region*	*District*
1.	Chhaur	Yadav	Baghelkhand	Rewa, Satna (MP)
2.	Jhalkaribai	Kori	Bundelkhand	Jhansi, Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Banda
3.	Bijli Maharaj	Pasi	Avadh	Lucknow, Bahraich, Barabanki, Jaunpur and Allahabad
4.	Daldev Maharaj	Pasi	Purvanchal	Rae Bareli, Jaunpur and Allahabad
5.	Baaledeen	Pasi	Purvanchal and Avadh	Kausambi and Allahabad
6.	Mahamaya	Buddhist	Purvanchal	Varanasi, Ghazipur, Ballia, Basti and Deoria
7.	Ravidas	Chamar	Purvanchal	Varanasi, Jaunpur, Allahabad and Azamgarh
8.	Vira Pasi	Pasi	Avadh	Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and Allahabad
9.	Udadevi	Pasi	Avadh and Central UP	Allahabad, Pratapgarh and Sultanpur

Source: Compiled from *Jansatta*, 28 July 1997 and other sources.

BARDS, CULTURAL SQUADS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF MYTHS

Various methods are used for transmitting these myths at the grass-roots level. Among them is the use of bards for composing ballads and roving through villages singing them aloud. This is similar to that found among high castes where professional singers called *charan* and *bhaants* narrate the caste glory of each caste through songs and dances (Narayan 2002: 161). In UP, the Pasmangta is a subgroup of the Dalit Pasi caste whose profession is to go to the doors of each Pasi family singing stories taken from their caste history. In their songs about a Pasi hero, the bards succeed in creating a link between the Pasis and these heroes. In return each family donates offerings like rice, turmeric and other objects for consumption. These professional minstrels are however not found among all Dalit castes but only in those castes that claim to be martial communities and erstwhile rulers. With growing education and urbanization this profession is slowly dying out but the songs and ballads composed by them are still part of the oral tradition of these communities and are now being used for identify assertion and political mobilization. One such song narrating the glory of the Pasi caste is as follows:

Shri ram have raj pasi
Vir pasi, dheer pasi
Biveki aur gambhir pasi
Bijli pasi ke vansh pasi

(Translated)

(Like Shri Ram are the Raj Pasis
Brave Pasis, firm Pasis
Intelligent and steady Pasis
The descendants of Bijli Pasi are the Pasis)[20]

Today *pasmangta geet* (song) has become a generic term for the songs sung by bards among the Dalits. These songs are now used by the BSP to transmit the glory of various castes so as to arouse their caste pride and help construct their identities. The old bards of specific Dalit communities, folk singers, political poets and singers deployed by the BSP for this purpose form part of the Cultural Squad (*Jagriti Dasta*). This squad consists of writers, playwrights, poets, artists and so on, whose job is to write songs, ballads, poems, plays and paint pictures about Dalit consciousness and transmit these messages to the villages through the various cultural performances of that region (Singh 1994: 122). Often they pick up the folk songs and ballads popular in particular regions and rewrite them with words carrying political nuances that will evoke the people at the grass roots. These cultural performances narrate the glory of Dalit icons like Ambedkar, Phule, Mayawati, Kanshi Ram, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Bijli Pasi, Avantibai, Mahaviridevi and so on (ibid.: 1–2). These stories, poems and so on are also printed in popular booklets, which the people buy and read at their leisure. The lead singer of the Cultural Squad in Allahabad, Babulal Bhanwra says that when Mayawati (of the BSP) was standing for elections, they used to often perform dramas and musical folk plays (*nautanki*s) based on the lives of female heroes so as to help the audience associate them with Mayawati. In addition they also sing songs written by Dalit poets like Ramesh Chandra Baudh and A.R. Akela. Babulal Bhanwra himself has composed many songs in folk song genres like *kajari*, *biraha*, *doha*, *chaupai*, *chaubela*, *kawwali* and so on through which the singers could transmit the messages of the BSP (see Figure 3.1). A song composed by him in the *pasmangta* genre to arouse the sense of identity among the Dalits at the grass roots is as follows:

Figure 3.1
Photograph of an election meeting of the BSP in Bundelkhand where R.N. Suman, a Dalit singer, sings the glory of Jhalkaribai

Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

Bir Dalit dheer Dalit
Buddhiman evam gambhir Dalit
Desh khatir bhaile kurban ho Dalit veeron

(Translated)

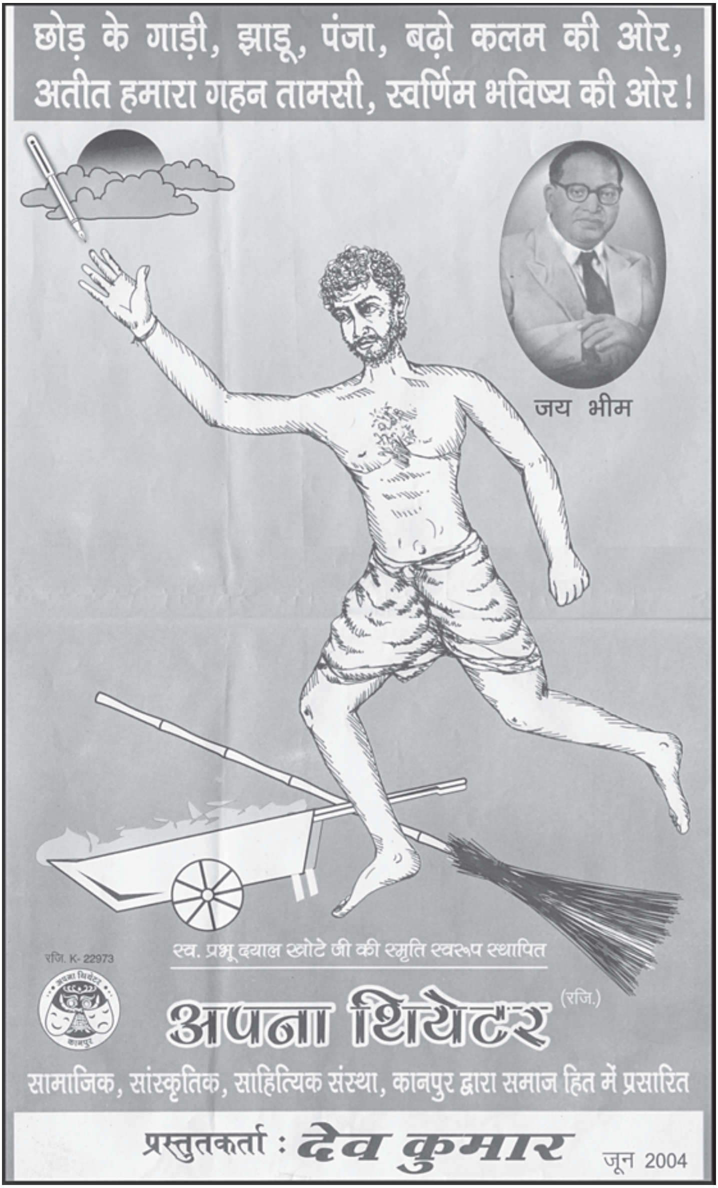
(Brave Dalit steady Dalit
Intelligent and firm Dalit
Sacrificing themselves for the country)[21]

Pyarelal, another member of the Cultural Squad of Allahabad said that the squad also screens documentaries on the life of Ambedkar, a film on Dalit heroes produced by NDTV (a TV channel), and Hindi films like *Damul* produced by a famous director Prakash Jha that shows atrocities on Dalits by upper castes, in villages and districts. They also play and sell audio cassettes containing speeches of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati at rallies and political meetings just before the speeches of the local BSP leaders.[22]

Another effective mode for transmitting the political messages of the BSP is the Cycle Squad (*Cycle Dasta*) in which groups of party workers ride cycles across villages and towns shouting slogans. They stop at short intervals to communicate their messages to the people by linking them with the myths of that region (Singh 1994: 1–2) by songs and speeches delivered in the storytelling manner. Organizing functions, rallies and meetings commemorating the birth or death anniversary of Dalit heroes is also a forum for transmitting the political messages of BSP. During her three tenures as chief minister, Mayawati organized numerous functions to inaugurate statues of saints and other great persons revered by Dalits. Various exhibitions were also organized highlighting their achievements, to make the people aware of their glory and self-respect. Through such functions and exhibitions, the myths and caste stories around these heroes reached the Dalits. Kanshi Ram believed that one of the methods for empowering the Dalits is to link them with their genealogies, and caste myths are important means of doing so (ibid.: 14). That is why the mobilizational language of the BSP is heavily loaded with myths and caste legends of the Dalit communities. Repeated evocation of the memory of local and national personalities of these castes helps to consolidate the identity of the depressed castes and subcastes so as to enable them to be effective entities in caste-based competitive politics.

Figure 3.2

Poster of Apna Theatre, a Dalit theatre group active in and around Kanpur



Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

Along with the Cultural Squad of the BSP many Dalit activist theatre groups also visit villages, districts and small towns of UP and present cultural performances in the form of theatre or *nautanki*s to arouse Dalit consciousness through cultural genres. These groups are active in the regions of Kanpur, Banaras, Allahabad, Lucknow, Bareli, Jhansi and so on.[23] Prominent among such theatres is the Apna Theatre active in Kanpur and other places within UP (see Figure 3.2). It was established by Dev Kumar, a social activist and also a writer of Dalit popular booklets on 14 April 1992. He was dedicated to arousing consciousness among the people of Dalit communities through the medium of this theatre. His first *natak* (drama), *Daastan* was based on ill deeds of the Aryans. His other plays include *Bhadra Angulimaal*, *Chakradhari*, *Sudarshan*, *Kapat*, *Agyat Etihaas* (based on the *veerangana* Udadevi Pasi), *Amar Shaheed Matadin Bhangi* and *Jamadaar Ka Kurta* and so on. Another theatre group by the name of 'Mandali' is popular in Banaras and among the other regions of eastern UP. This theatre group helps people in reliving their glorious past by singing praises of Dalit heroes and histories thereby generating a feeling of honour and pride for their respective castes. Many educated Dalits have also opened schools for Dalit children where cultural programmes are organized on national days like 26 January, 15 August and on important Dalit occasions especially on the birthday of Dr Ambedkar. In these functions, which are targeted towards the Dalit communities living there, children perform plays and dances, recite poems and sing songs narrating incidents of atrocities, injustice, oppression and exploitation to the people of these communities. They also narrate the glory of Dalit heroes, which helps to arouse a sense of pride and glory among the audience. The political message of the BSP is also transmitted through these functions.[24]

Visuals and Rituals

The translation of the heroes of the Dalits into the visual form has added many new elements in the culture of the people of that region. One of them is the emergence and development of rituals that are practiced at the time of celebrations to commemorate a particular hero. During functions organized to celebrate the birth or death anniversary of heroes like Jhalkarbai, Udadevi, Bijli Pasi and so on, secular activities like giving speeches, reciting poems, singing songs or performing dramas, are also accompanied by religious activities like lighting incense sticks, garlanding

the statues with flowers, decorating them with vermillion and so on. *Mantra*s and chants narrating the glory of these heroes have also emerged and are strongly reminiscent of upper-caste hymns sung while offering prayers. In Jhansi, for example, regular worship (*puja*) is held before the statue of Jhalkaribai, which was installed by the BSP in front of the fort of Rani Laxmi Bai.[25] The sites of these statues are also the venue for poetic conferences where poets from many regions of UP are invited to recite poems invoking the glory of the heroes. In this manner, on the one hand, the statues and the sites around them provide both social and public spaces to Dalits for the expression of their identities, and on the other, they have also led to the creation of rituals and customs, which, while found in abundance among the upper castes, were very few in their communities.

Thus, useful for the political mobilization of Dalit communities, these visual images of these Dalit heroes have also led to the arousal of a strong sense of identity and self-respect among marginalized communities. They have also helped in creating awareness among non-Dalit castes with regard to lower-caste heroes, about which they knew very little, thus raising the prestige and status of these Dalit castes in their eyes.

Notes

1. Field visit to Lucknow and districts adjoining it like Mohanlalganj and Bahraich in April 2004.
2. Field visit to villages surrounding Lucknow on 13 March 2004.
3. Taken from a study done by Gopal Shukla. See Shukla 2003.
4. Field visit to Jittora, Bahraich in April 2004.
5. Field visit to Lucknow in April 2004.
6. Oral interview with O.P. Agrawal, aged seventy, Bahraich, on 24 April 2004.
7. Story narrated by Nasimuddin Siddiqui in an interview given to V.N. Rai, Ramanandsaraswati Pustakalaya, Azamgarh, 1997.
8. Based on oral interviews with respondents, Azamgarh, 19 May 2005.
9. Oral interview with Ram Sharan Ram, Azamgarh, on 5 May 2005.
10. Based on the interviews with Leelavati, Basantram, Vinod Kumar Bharati, Shivnath and other residents of villages Kotwa, Chaukukhurd, Bankat Bazaar, Janpad Azamgarh, on 19 July 2005.
11. *Hindustan*, 21 September 1998.
12. Oral interview with Omkar Singh, Azamgarh, 11 May 2005.
13. Oral interview with Ram Nagina Yadav, Azamgarh, 12 May 2005.
14. Oral interview with sculptor Surjit, Azamgarh, 19 July 2005.
15. Same as Note 9.
16. Oral interview with Sahodar Pasi, Azamgarh, 19 July 2005.
17. Hand written letter by Dr B.R. Ambedkar to Swami Achhutananda, Mathura, February 1932, preserved in the Dalit Resource Centre Archive, Allahabad.

18. Interview with Lal Singh, an old RPI activist, Pratapgarh, 6 May 1995.
19. Interview with Bhawani Shankar, Kanpur, 3 June 2003.
20. Oral interview with Sukhdev Pasmangta collected in Barwaripur, 26 May 2005.
21. Oral interview with Babulal Bhanwra, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
22. Oral interview with Pyarelal, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
23. Field visits to different regions of UP during May to July 2005.
24. Field visit to Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
25. Field visit to Jhansi, June 2005.

Chapter 4

Identity Politics and New Historical Resources: Dalit Location in 1857 History

Those who have control over democracy also have control over history.

Dalit writer, S. Rao Sanjeevan Nath

The BSP has always been on the look out for new historical resources that can be added to its repertoire for creating a more influential language to expand its mass base and mobilize more and more communities. These new resources are then transformed into identity resources and disseminated to the people through various mediums, as discussed earlier. However in the process of dissemination, only certain types of heroes emerge as identity markers. These heroes form the master base of the BSP's resources out of which it selects those it considers appropriate for its political mobilization. As mentioned earlier, the 1857 Rebellion is the richest historical resource for the BSP. The heroes of this movement, as projected by the Dalits, are Balluram Mehtar, Udaiya Pasi, Chetram Jatav, Banke Chamar, Ganga Baksh, Beera Pasi, Makka Pasi, Matadin Bhangi. The women heroes of this movement are, among others, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Avantibai, Pannadhai and Mahaviridevi (Vidrohi 2004). These heroes form the master base of the BSP. It is noteworthy that the BSP did not find the heroes from other phases in the Indian freedom movement, like Madari Pasi who led the *Kisan Andolan* (Farmer's Rebellion) that took place in UP in 1914 (R.P. Saroj 1997: 27), or the Dalit matyrs of the Chauri Chaura incident (Vidrohi 2004: 176), significant enough to be developed as icons. The heroes picked up by BSP were initially used to mobilize the specific caste groups to which they belonged but gradually they were transformed into icons for the entire Dalit community. For example, when Jhalkaribai was being used for mobilizing

the 'Kori' caste to which she belonged she was referred to as Jhalkaribai Kori. But later when her myth was being used to build up the image of Mayawati, she came to be known only as Jhalkaribai. Similarly, the caste names of Udadevi 'Pasi', Mahaviridevi 'Bhangi', Avantibai 'Lodhi' and Pannadhai 'Dhanuk' were dropped while linking their stories with Mayawati's. This, however, does not imply that the caste identity of Dalits was being homogenized into one Dalit identity. Rather, while a broader Dalit identity was being forged through electoral mobilization by the BSP under one political umbrella, their caste identity was also simultaneously being strengthened through the stories of their caste heroes.

The political strategy of the BSP is to tell and retell the stories of the heroes, build memorials and to repeatedly organize celebrations around their stories so that they may be etched into the collective psyche of the people. The stories are narrated in a manner that would ensure that the Dalits are able to imagine the story of the making of this nation in which they claim to have played a significant role. Several books like *Swatantrata Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan* (Dinkar 1990), *Jhoothi Azadi* (Madan 1987), *Pasi Samaj Ka Swatantrata Sangram Mein Yogdan* (Pasi 1998), *Dalit Dastavej* (Vidrohi 2004) and so on, document the contributions of various Dalit heroes in different phases of India's freedom struggle. The significance of the sacrifices made by their ancestors are reasserted by saying that despite their sacrifices, the desires, dreams and aspirations for the nation-state are yet to be fulfilled. These narratives help them to claim a respectable place in the contemporary process of nation building and a lion's share in State-sponsored development projects and other democratic benefits. By repeatedly narrating their role in the nation making process, the marginalized communities put forward a moral logic in favour of reservations and social justice for themselves. They contend that despite the blood and sweat that they had shed for the building of this nation and their historical role in its development, the State has not helped them to recover from their social, cultural and economic losses. Through these narratives they assert that their role in the recorded history of nation making has not been sufficiently acknowledged and their contribution in the freedom struggle has been completely ignored (Dinkar 1990: 23). The narratives of the 1857 Rebellion helped them not only to establish their own heroes, but also to dethrone the existing higher-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives. In their narratives, they presented the high castes as traitors, conspirators and communities which were dishonest to their motherland. The Dalits also attempted to prove that by capturing history, these traitors now appear as most nationalist.

They have become the most influential sections after independence (Vidrohi 2004: 86). The Dalits thus feel that there are sufficient grounds to explore *their* contribution to the freedom struggle and gain compensation for it in the present.

Over the last few decades, affirmative action by the State has produced some powerful leaders from the Dalit and low caste communities at many different levels of public–political life in the country. This has directly impacted on the politics of historiography in India, leading to the deconstruction of the legitimacy of history and its dominant methodologies. The effect of this has been the democratization of history as knowledge of the communities, which ultimately leads to the larger goal of democratization of history as a discipline. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2003), in his paradigm shifting article on the changing methodologies and epistemology of history, mentions that history as a formal discipline was introduced to the Indians during the British rule. At that time, historical evidence and ideas of truth and reality were central to the discipline. In the post-colonial period too, history as a discipline has remained anchored in this idea of evidence. But with developments in Indian democracy and the changing political arena in which Dalits and subalterns have become the principal actors, the distinction between a myth and a verifiable fact is becoming blurred. The modes of reasoning taught in the courses on social theory in universities are not necessarily obvious to citizens from the subaltern classes who now actively shape the character of Indian democracy. Chakrabarty identifies that there is an obvious paradigm shift in which the history as proposed by subalterns and Dalits, which is grossly different from professional academic history, is actively and consciously redefining the boundaries of history as knowledge.

In the changing socio-political milieu of Indian democracy, projects of inventing and reinventing the past are being undertaken by many marginalized communities to support their demand for an appropriate share in the power structure of state and society. The social and historical meaning of the past is being recreated and in this process, the past becomes the subject of present reflection and reconstruction to change one's marginalized social position. Here, the past is not merely a bygone past. It is, instead, built into the present. In this condition, the past not only appears as the professional historian's past, which is claimed to be 'rational history' based on empirical and positiv-istic notions of the past (Davies 2003: 5). It also appears as the past that helps the Dalits in their ongoing struggle for carving their future against the oppressive present. This past is the living history of these communities, which they may have experienced

in reality or cognitively, and helps them to forge connectivity with their own selves (Hoy 1985). The structures of power that condition the knowledge and the writing of history are deconstructed in a way that presents a critique to the nation-state through Dalit narratives of nationalism, and puts forward their identities and differences for an appropriate share in power and in development. New histories are also being generated as knowledge base and resources for their democratic struggle for a better quality of life. This reflects a criticism raised by the communities who have not been fully co-opted in history and power, and in the democratic processes and development schemes run by the Indian nation-state. Foucault observed a similar process in the relationship between co-option, social resistance and social development (Foucault 1974: 367). This phenomenon is widely observed in UP, Bihar and Maharashtra and is a recently growing tendency in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Haryana. It may also be prevailing in other Indian states where Dalit empowerment is on the agenda.

In this agenda the past has been an integral and constitutive element of identity assertion and also a medium for coping with the oppressive present. There has also been a strong urge and need to link these narratives about the past with the story of the making of the nation for Dalits in the contemporary socio-political context. These narratives describing the role of the lower castes in the making of the modern nation are being popularized through booklets and prints composed by these communities themselves, and also through the political discourses of activists and leaders belonging to the literate section of Dalit communities. These then percolate down to the illiterate section through various modes of transmission, as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

In the political scenario that has emerged in the wake of the BSP, many castes that earlier had violent and contesting relations, are now redefining their identities to come close to each other and forge a unity. This can be seen in the case of two major Dalit castes in UP namely the Chamars and the Pasis who have always had an antagonistic relationship. Historically, the Pasis were the watchmen and stick wielders (*lathail*) of feudal landlords. This often forced them to beat up the Chamars at the behest of their masters. This had made the two castes traditionally enemies of the other.[1] But today in the new political environment created by the BSP, which is compelling the Pasis and the Chamars to come together under the same political umbrella, the Pasis claim that if they had not beaten the Chamars, the upper castes would have themselves beaten them, which would have been worse. The sticks of the Pasis thus saved the

Chamars from the sticks of the upper castes.[2] Today the Dalits link all the heroes who are symbols of Dalit identity with themselves, irrespective of the caste they belong to. This was observed in the narrative of Bhullar; a Chamar living in Shahabpur, a village in UP. While narrating the history of the Chamar caste, Bhullar also narrated the story of Eklavya, who the Nishads claim as belonging to their caste, and the story of Dr Ambedkar, who was a Mahar from Maharashtra.[3] This shows that Bhullar and people like him had extended their caste identity to a broader Dalit identity under the influence of the BSP. This feeling has also permeated into the Nishads who earlier considered themselves to be above the Chamars and Pasis in the caste hierarchy and used to look down upon them as being low (*heya*). Today under the sway of BSP politics, the Nishads, Chamars and Pasis all came to be seen as Dalits and should, therefore, live together in harmony and fight unitedly for their common cause. This sentiment was voiced by Avinash Choudhry, a Nishad organic intellectual, living in Kidganj, Allahabad, on the banks of the river Ganga.[4]

It is thus evident that a broad category of Dalits is emerging under the influence of the BSP. To strengthen and develop this category, the individual castes that were earlier antagonistic to each other, have been renarrating their caste histories so as to link themselves with the others. This phenomenon may be seen as the formation of electoral alliances of castes that were historically deprived of political benefits. This seems to be operating at two levels. The first is at the grass-roots level where political polarization has been taking place between the different castes because of the emergence of democratic electoral opportunities. The second is the formation of a political unity among the SCs, STs and the OBCs by the BSP. To attain this unity, the BSP first aroused the caste identities of each marginalized caste using their caste heroes and histories, and then unified them by creating a metanarrative of Dalit history with the help of symbols picked out from their master base of caste heroes, myths and legends of each caste. As shown in the earlier chapters, this metanarrative was used to homogenize all the Dalit castes by showing the universal ill-treatment of the lower castes by the upper castes. It claimed that this ill-treatment was sanctioned in the ancient Hindu texts, especially the *Manu Samhita*, which is the Brahminical code of conduct documented by a saint called Manu, which is still believed and followed consciously or unconsciously by most upper-caste Hindus, expecially in the Hindi heartland of UP and Bihar (Bharti 1997: 87). The essence of *Manu Samhita*, also called *Manuvad* by the BSP is that the lower castes or Shudras and women as a category, irrespective of their caste, should not have access to education, wealth and other aspects of human rights.

The code espoused by him consigned Shudras and women to an inferior position that was devoid of basic respect as human beings. The Dalits too had accepted their inferior position in society as a punishment for their sins in a former life, which was the explanation given to them by the upper castes. While mobilizing them, the BSP demanded restitution for these historical injustices in the form of reservation or protective discrimination in education and jobs. The historical debate on the division of ancient Indian society based on the Brahminical cultural code constituted a major plank in the BSP's political discourse (Singh 1994: 13).

Today the BSP, under the leadership of Mayawati, is now trying to widen its mass base by forming political alliances even with its sworn enemies like the Brahmins, Thakurs and Banias. Earlier the contestation was between Brahminism and the non-Brahminic caste forces; but now, under the compulsions of new challenges posed by electoral politics in UP, the BSP is allowing the participation of even the Brahminical castes, in their agenda of strengthening identity politics. Since the beginning of 2005, the party has been organizing Brahmin conferences, Yadav conferences, Sahu conferences and many more caste conferences in various parts of UP to redefine the identities of these castes and bring them under the fold of *Dalit-Bahujan* politics which they have now termed '*Sarvajan*' (all the people) to include even the upper castes (Bharti 2004: 103). The shift in the Dalit discourse can be seen through the changes in slogans before 2005 and after 2005. Earlier the slogan of BSP was '*Tilak, Taraju aur Talwar, Inko maro joote char*' (Tilak, symbol of Brahmins; Taraju, symbol of Banias and Talwar, symbol of the Thakurs, beat them four times with shoes) (Kumar and Sinha 2001). Now the slogan to co-opt the upper castes is '*Haathi nahi Ganesh hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai*' (Elephant, symbol of BSP, now represents Ganesh; Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the trio of Hindu Vedic gods are now the gods of the BSP too) (Anand 2005). Their slogan to include the Banias in their fold is '*Bahujan, Mahajan, Bhai Bhai*' (Bahujan, Mahajan, the popular name of Banias, are brothers).[5] One can clearly observe the political efforts to provide politically correct meanings to the caste identities of these new entrants within the BSP's fold and to overcome caste contestations by moulding and reinterpreting the past to suit its political agenda.

Imagination, Nation and Communities

The imagination of communities about their nation developed with the rise and growth of the print culture. Benedict Anderson (1983),

Peter Van der Veer (1991) and others rightly suggest that the modern nation cannot be imagined without the collective simultaneity of the private act of reading, made possible by print capitalism. Anderson emphasizes on the development of newspapers, books and administrative bureaucracies that made it possible for millions of people to 'imagine' themselves as part of the same community or nation. According to him, the remarkable redefinition of identities resulted from cultural transformations that evolved along with new technologies for distributing information in the early modern era. New technologies disseminated new cultural narratives in newspapers and novels, all of which 'created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.' By reading stories about their nations in schools, and in books and newspapers, individuals came to imagine and identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local worlds in which they lived their daily lives (Kramer 1997). This imagination evoked through the print media does not work exclusively but has close interaction with the oral imagination of the people. When communities imagine themselves through print they remember many things from their oral memories and they also create many new elements that are added to the oral memory of the people.

The process of imagining the nation by the Dalits became faster with the rise and growth of literacy, print technology and the act of writing among marginalized communities. They mostly imagined their nation in the historical biographies of their national heroes and freedom fighters, who, in their perception, played a greater role in freeing and developing the nation than did the conventional heroes of the nationalist movement. They also wrote small historical novels that showed the role of some Dalit castes in the freedom struggle. Through these novels they narrated their sacrifice and role in the freedom movement of the nation, while also expressing their disillusionment with the newly emerged nation. Through the narration of these stories a space in the nation-making process is carved out. Despite this, they also reflect unfulfilled desires and aspirations. While narrating about the history of their role in the national struggle, their narrative appears to be a critical dialogue with the contemporary state, different from an idealist, emotional, elite narrative type. The past, which is narrated by mainstream academic historians and nationalist leaders, does not provide much space to the marginalized communities for their own narrative of the past. That is why they successfully attempt to invent their past by writing popular (hi)stories based on their role in the process of nation making. Their claiming to a large role in the nation-making

process has helped them to demand an appropriate share in the democratic processes of the nation-state. This is an alternative construction of the idea of the nation, which is different from the idea constructed by many post-colonial states using nationalist myths and sentiments that help to control, suppress and discriminate against minority groups.

Ideas of nationalism are important factors for connecting people to the nation-state. These linkages of the nationalist narratives with the practice and power of the nation-state make nationalism one of the most powerful forces in contemporary modern society. Nationalism influences many competing marginalized communities to link themselves with the nationalist narrative. One problem that becomes visible in this process is that the struggle for space within the nationalist narrative compels the Dalits to prove themselves to be more nationalist than others. For the castes who aspire to alternative politics, this may sometimes lead to their absorption in the dominant metanarrative which is the politics of the dominant elite sections.

When communities narrate about the nation, an element of imagination about the nation-building process always prevails. As suggested by Hans Kohn, nationalism is a 'state of mind, an act of consciousness' (Kohn 1944: 10). For the Dalits to make their presence felt in the nation-making process it was important that their role in this process be acknowledged in the pages of history. That is why they tried to create their own space within the existing framework of the narrative of Indian nationalism. Nationalism becomes, in this context, a modern ideological expression of their quest for social recognition. It provided a practical, this-worldly solution to their problem so as to put an end to their sense of alienation in society.

This premise of nation as an invented category which assumed the notion of the 'modern' and of being 'mentally constructed' was proposed by Carlton Hayes and Hans Kohn (quoted in Palti 2001). The imaginary or invented construction of the nation is not a mere fictitious act but is, in fact, anterior to any other 'ideological construction' (ibid.). That is why one can find various types of imaginary constructions about the nation in the narratives created by the Dalits.

Multiple Meanings of the Nation

This need to link the Dalits with the nationalist narratives is reflected in the ideological statements of Kanshi Ram, founder of the BSP. He called

his movement a real nationalist step. He also explains his views on national unity by saying that for him the meaning of national unity is to correct the social imbalance. He perceived the move to unite the Dalits as an essential prerequisite for national unity. He believed that the true meaning of the formation of the nation-state was to provide a fair share for the Bahujans in state power and administration. He alleged that Brahminism decelerated the process of nation making by dividing the Dalits into fragments for its own vested interest (Singh 1994: 58).

The story of nationalism as narrated by the Dalits not only expresses their desire to be a part of the nation-building process, but also reflects their inner aspirations to emerge as an important and active group in the process of social modernization. While explaining the Dalits' urge to link themselves with the narrative of nationalism in the present context, Mata Prasad, an important Dalit leader of UP, opined that Indian society still believed that the Dalits have made no significant contribution to the history of the Indian freedom struggle and that they demand reservations and privileges from the post-colonial state without even having played a significant role in the freedom struggle so as to justify such privileges. But studies undertaken by intellectuals make it clear that the people of this community did play an active role in the 1857 Rebellion and in the various other phases of the Indian freedom struggle (quoted in Dinkar 1990). These kinds of narratives linking the Dalits with the narrative of the Indian freedom struggle are necessary for them to justify their demand for special privileges from the post-independent Indian State.

Dalit intellectuals and political leaders perceive Dalit history as a source of inspiration for these castes (Chaudhury 1997). Identifying their role in the freedom struggle was a part of their urge to build their self-confidence, as an inspiration to develop their future course of action which was to enhance their social status, and to construct their self-identity. Besides this, an added interest was to establish a logic for their demand from the State for reservation, scholarship and also to corner a major share in the development projects. The basis of these narratives was that the communities that had played an important role in the freedom struggle were still backward. They asserted that it was the duty of the State to pay more attention towards their development than to the development of other communities (Manohara 1989: 16). The views that were disseminated through their narratives, reflected through their speeches, political pamphlets, booklets and general discussions, were that it was the moral duty of the State to fulfil all their demands. Through these narratives they wanted to establish that what they were getting from the State was not enough to compensate for their sacrifices in the freedom struggle (ibid.).

The construction of Dalit narratives was based on a sense of self-respect. The emotional requirement of social prestige was both a product and a cause of their long-suffered social ignorance and dissatisfaction. For acquiring social respect, it was important for them to ensure that those things, which are a matter of pride for their community were glorified, and that the prevalent notion, that their lower status is because of their immorality, as defined by Brahminical canons, was reversed. The identity created through their narratives of the past by the Dalits renders instable the canons determined by Brahminism for granting status in society, such as purity-pollution beliefs, birth-based ascription, specific caste characterization and caste hierarchy, and status ascription. Status, prestige and honour-mobility concern individuals as well as groups because they constitute a stable criterion for social differentiation. They are elements of subjective consciousness that are based more upon ascription, values and styles of life than on objective criteria. These notions were the result of the desires and aspirations that emerged among the educated lower-caste social groups. Many social groups that had not realised their latent potentials and were unaware of political changes taking place in society became aware of their own power. This led to a feeling of unity and fraternity among these groups, which also gave rise to the understanding of the meaning of democracy as being given the opportunity to move forward socially. This sense also played a determinate role in the creation of a new Dalit narrative.

This phenomenon can be observed in Dalit caste history writing. The emergence of lower-caste authors and readers presupposed a certain spread of formal education. Schools of the ‘modern’ or colonial kind gave importance to the study of history, which was absent from the curricula of the traditional *pathshala*s (schools). This emphasis on history could have been the fundamental reason for the need for ‘historical’ arguments expressed in the early 20th century caste tracts by the Dalit authors. The emergence of the print medium and the associated rise of vernacular prose and the variety and affordability of printed texts, facilitated the emergence of a public sphere that included a growing number of women and a sprinkling of lower-caste men. Another closely related factor was the development, from around the turn of the century, of open argumentation that extended beyond the boundaries of traditional high-caste male literati, on a number of issues, including, notably, caste issues. Economic changes altered the status of various occupations and social groups as well as modes of production. This change in the social pattern also brought about awareness about nationalism because nationalists often

attracted followers from groups that were losing or seeking to gain social status. Nationalism thus became and still becomes a modern, ideological expression of the perennial human quest for social recognition and it appeals most to those people who feel least respected.

These narratives build up an alternate history in which Dalits are at the centre. In this process of identity construction, there is usually an 'other,' which is constructed for establishing one's own logic and narrative power. In other words, in the power struggle that has been going on with the other castes, the aim of the Dalits is to capture more space and win the most opportunities to become developed and respectable. In these historical stories, all the communities are placed in a hierarchical order with their own community on the top rung. Tendencies such as these can be seen in the writings of Dalit historians like Vidrohi (2004), Pasi (1998), Madan (1987), Dinkar (1990), Nath (1998a, 1998b) and so on. According to their narration of history, they attempt to establish that the development of the present Indian nation and all its infrastructural development has been possible only due to the hard labour of the Dalits and the untouchables. They argue that the untouchables were roped in for the construction of railways and bridges and were made to work day and night. If they were unable to work due to ill health or fatigue, they were still made to suffer great hardships. The railway track from Karachi to Kolkata and from Shimla to Rameshwaram was laid on the blood, sweat and sacrifice of millions of untouchables. Only because of their back breaking labour was it possible to link the whole of the country by railways (Dinkar 1990: 140).

In their own narratives, the Dalits did not like to believe that the nationalist consciousness that they had developed was a result of the speeches, discourses and political actions of Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, they preferred to believe that this consciousness developed within their community as a result of their continuous struggle against social, political, cultural and economic inequalities. A consciousness about their exploitation, atrocities and injustice was generated within them, which helped them to develop the power to fight against this exploitation. They became more concerned about their own well being and also became concerned about the freedom of their motherland. This awareness was what led to many encounters with the British (Madan 1987: 16).

DALIT MEMORIES OF 1857

The Dalits have an emotional link with the 1857 War of Independence for they believe that it was initiated by them. They claim that it was the

Soldier Revolt by the mostly Dalit Indian soldiers of the British Army that took place in Jhansi in 1857, that snowballed into the War of Independence. It was a War of Independence since the Dalits were fighting for their motherland rather than to gain power. The war was led by Bhau Bakshi and Puran Kori and with them was Jhalkaribai who fought bravely against the British for the sake of her motherland (Dinkar 1990: 62). The Dalit narrative of the first freedom struggle is filled with stories about brave women martyrs belonging to suppressed communities, such as Jhalkaribai, Avantibai, Pannadhai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi (ibid.: 27). According to them, the 1857 War of Independence, which the elites claim was started by Mangal Pandey, was actually inspired by Matadin Bhangi. The story is narrated in such a manner that Matadin Bhangi emerges as the source of inspiration for the revolt.

Their narrative is as follows:

There was a factory in Barrackpore where cartridges were manufactured. Many of the workers of this factory belonged to the untouchable communities. One day one of the workers felt thirsty. He asked a soldier for a mug of water. That soldier was Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey refused him water because the worker was an untouchable. This was very humiliating for the worker. He retaliated to the Brahmin soldier saying,
'Bara awa hai Brahaman ka beta. Jin kartuson ka tum upayog karat ho, unpar gaaye or suar ki charbi lagawal jaat hai, jinhe tum apan daatun se torkar banduk mein bharat ho. O samay tomhar jati aur dharam kahan jawat. Dhikkar tumhare is brahmanatwa ka.' (You claim to be a highly respectable Brahmin, but the cartridges which you bite with your teeth and insert in your guns, are all rubbed with the fat of cows and pigs. What happens to your caste and religion then? Curse on your Brahminism.)

Hearing this the soldier was taken by surprise. That untouchable was none other than Matadin Bhangi, who opened the eyes of the Indian soldier and ignited the first spark of India's independence in the cantonment. The words of Matadin Bhangi spread like wildfire through the cantonment. Very soon the torch of independence was lighted. On the morning of 1 March 1857, Mangal Pandey broke the line during the parade. Accusing the British of spoiling their religious sentiments, he started firing indiscriminately at them. This was the moment when the first battle lines against the British were drawn. Mangal Pandey was arrested in an injured condition. He was court-martialed, and in 1857 he was hanged from the gallows before all the soldiers. Mangal Pandey's sacrifice became an inspiration for all the soldiers. On 10 May 1857, the floodgate of the independence movement burst in Barrackpore in which many brave sons of India became martyrs. In the chargesheet that was made, the first name was

that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested. All the arrested revolutionaries were court-martialed. Matadin was charged with treason against the British. (Dinkar 1990: 37)

S.R. Sajeevan Nath, in his book *1857 Ki Kranti Ka Janak: Nagvanshi Bhangi Matadin Hela*, also narrates a similar story in which Matadin Bhangi is seen to be the father (*janak*) of the 1857 Rebellion. In these narratives, Matadin Bhangi is presented as the moving force behind the 1857 Revolt. They also try to show how the forward class refused to hand a glass of water to the untouchables although they bit cartridges rubbed with cow's fat. Thus, these narratives, along with a description of the nationalist movement, questions the hierarchical structure of the Indian society. The rigid structure that disallows the untouchables to go near the forward castes because of their low birth and ritual 'dirtiness' is strongly criticized. To prove the historicity of this event, a book written by one Shri Acharya Bhagwan Deb called *The immortal revolutionaries of India*, has been quoted by Dinkar (ibid.: 38).

The memory of Matadin Bhangi and his contribution to the nationalist movement is celebrated in a number of ways by the Dalits. Many songs have been composed in his honour that are sung in rallies and functions, both cultural and political. Plays are staged at commemorative functions held in his honour in towns and villages. Special issues of magazines are brought out with articles by eminent writers highlighting his contributions. A fortnightly newspaper *Dalit Kesari* published a special issue on the 1857 Revolt in which the lead article was on Matadin Bhangi.[6] *Anarya Bharat*, another Dalit newspaper that is published from Mainpuri in UP, brought out a special feature on the contribution of Dalits to the 1857 Revolt. In all these publications they projected Matadin Bhangi as a pioneer of the First War of Indian Independence. *Himayati*, a Dalit literary magazine, in its May 1996 issue that celebrated the memory of 1857, published a special feature and lead article on the contribution of Matadin Bhangi. In the same issue, Dr Sohanpal Sumanshankar wrote very strongly that the first person who sowed the seeds of the 1857 Rebellion was Matadin Bhangi but, unfortunately, historians have forgotten his contribution.[7]

In this manner, the elite nationalist history has been subverted by the Dalits in their favour. Kuar Singh, Tantya Tope and Nana Saheb do not figure in the Dalit narrative of the 1857 freedom struggle. The people who do figure are Chetram Jatav, Balluram Mehtar, Banke Chamar and Vira Pasi, who were martyrs born in the lower strata of society. Although the elite nationalist heroes are not negated, they are ignored in the Dalit

narratives. Their emphasis is on the sacrifice of the Dalit martyrs of the nation who sacrificed their lives despite their low birth and poor socio-economic status. Their brave confrontation with the British has also been high-lighted. The story of Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav has been de-scribed in the following manner:

> Although the dalits were born in the lowest caste of the Indian caste hierarchy and suffered great hardship because of their poor socio-economic status, they never sold themselves for their country. No one can accuse a single dalit of doing so. Whenever the need arose, they sacrificed their lives for their mother-land. Among the brave sons of the country, the names of Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav are written in shining letters. As soon as the news of the Barrackpore revolution reached the people, a mob of revolutionaries took to the streets. Mr. Phillips, who was an officer of the Eta district, tried to control the mob. On 26 May 1857, in the Soro region of Eta district, Chetram Jatav and Balluram Mehtar joined into the Barrackpore revolution without caring for their lives. In this revolution, Sadashiv Mehre, Chaturbhuj Vaish etc. were also present. Chetram Jatav and Balluram, who were the moving forces behind the revolution, were tied to trees and shot. The rest were hung from trees in the Kasganj area. (Dinkar 1990: 56)

The bravery of martyr Banke Chamar is also described. He lived in village Kuarpur, Macchli Shahar, *janpad* Jaunpur. When the revolution failed, the British declared Banke Chamar and eighteen of his associates as *baghi*s (revolutionaries). Banke Chamar was ordered to be hanged after being arrested. Thus, this brave revolutionary laid down his life for the country (ibid.: 59).

Amar Shaheed Vira Pasi is another Dalit who is remembered as a brave warrior in the Dalit narrative. He was a security guard of Raja Beni Madhav Singh of Murar Mau, in Rae Bareli, Uttar Pradesh. Raja Beni Madhav Singh was arrested for taking part in the revolt. One night, Vira Pasi entered the prison and helped the king escape. This was a big insult to the British administration. They decided to capture Vira Pasi dead or alive, and placed a reward of Rs 50,000 on his head. However, they were unable to capture him (ibid.: 64).

Another story that narrates their role in the 1857 movement is situated in the village Magarwara, about 10 km from Unnao on the Lucknow high-way. They claim that on 20 July 1857, a small battalion of the British army under the leadership of General Henry Havelock was passing through Magarwara to help another battalion that had got stuck in the Residency.

Nearly 2,000 Pasis came out of their hamlets and pelted the battalion with stones, which forced the battalion to return to the Kanpur cantonment. On 4 August 1857, the same battalion came to the village, this time with a lot of preparations. When the Pasis of Magarwara tried to stop them from moving forward a battle ensued and nearly 2,000 Pasis were killed (Pasi 1998: 34).

Yet another story narrated by the Pasis is situated in village Bani on the banks of the river Sai, close to Magarwara. This region consisted of many small Pasi hamlets. When the British army passed by this highway it faced a stiff resistance from the Pasis. Angered by this, the British officers asked the Pasis to vacate the area within five minutes. When the Pasis refused, the British announced that they would blow up the hamlets with canons. This caused great alarm. People ran helter skelter to save themselves and their families but despite this many Pasis were killed in the canon firing. The British found this region very salubrious and decided to build a fort where their soldiers, who had faced stiff resistance by the Pasis after leaving the Kanpur cantonment, could rest and restore their vigour. This story is a part of the collective memory and oral tradition of the Pasis of that region and is often presented in plays and songs. The song goes:

Bani bani kati bani, ban ke bigri bani
Angrezon ke tope se urhi, phir bani rahi bani.

(Translated)

(The village Bani was made, then destroyed,
again made and again destroyed;
the cannon balls of the British blew it apart,
then Bani was once again made and remained Bani.)

The story further narrates that the next day General Havelock once again moved forward with his troop to free the soldiers trapped in the Residency. Once again he had to face the wrath of the Indian freedom fighters, this time at the Alambagh Bhavya Bhawan. Many soldiers, both Indian and British, lost their lives in this battle. When the general reached Dilkushabagh, he had to fight the Indian freedom fighters again. These incidents took a toll on the British soldiers and drained the energy of General Havelock. He fell ill and finally succumbed to his illness on 24 November 1857. He was buried at the British Cemetary in Alambagh

(Pasi 1998). This story is documented as part of the contributions of the Pasis in the freedom struggle of the country, from where it is once again orally transmitted into the collective memory of the Dalits.

Another story that is narrated with pride is about Makka Pasi, the husband of Udadevi, who, like his wife, laid down his life for the sake of the country. The incident took place on 10 June 1857, when a small battalion of British soldiers under the leadership of Henry Lawrence was passing through Barabanki on their way to Chinhat from Avadh. In a village called Chinhat, Makka Pasi gathered an army of 200 Pasis and killed many British soldiers. Sensing a danger in him, Captain Lawrence shot Makka Pasi to stop him from killing more soldiers. The Pasis claim that Udadevi and Makka Pasi as a couple is the only example in world history where both the partners become martyrs. This couple has elevated the pride and glory not just of the Pasi community but also the entire country. Every Indian should be proud of such a couple that has made such a supreme sacrifice for their country (Pasi 2005: 90–91).

The Dalits, through their narratives of the 1857 Rebellion, have not only tried to establish their own heroes, but also tried to dethrone the existing high-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives. In their narratives they present the high castes as traitors and conspirators, and communities which were dishonest to their motherland. Through these narratives they also want to prove that by capturing history, these traitors of the nation now appear as the most nationalist of communities and have become the most influential sections after independence.

In the story of Jhalkaribai too, the Dalits did not recognize Rani Laxmibai as a martyr in an attempt to prove that she was hungry for power. According to the story she did not want to go against the British. It was only under the influence of Jhalkaribai that she agreed to revolt. At the end of the 1857 struggle, she did not become a martyr, she only hid herself in the estate of Pratapgarh.[8]

The historicity of these narratives is questionable, but the politics behind the creation and narration of these stories is to dethrone the established heroes of the mainstream narratives. A three-dimensional discursive strategy was adopted to achieve this aim. The first was to make allegations about the distortion, by mainstream writings, of the events of the 1857 struggle. The second was to establish their own heroes as freedom fighters who fought for their motherland. The third was to prove that *zamindar*s, feudal lords, and the wealthy classes of the society were conspirators of the British. The educated Indian intelligentsia was also to be established as conspiring with the British. In the preface of his booklet

Sepoy Mutiny (1857–58): An Indian Perfidy, A.K. Biswas, a Dalit from West Bengal who later became an IAS officer, wrote:

> The Indian history has been subjected to calculated distortion at the hands of educated Indians. Instances are galore in many walks of life. The Sepoy Mutiny (1857–58), though not even two centuries old and though there is vast mass of contemporary literatures, has suffered the same mindless perversion, truth has been swept under the carpet. In other words, it has not been allowed to come to the light. The Sepoy Mutiny is hailed today universally as the first war of Indian Independence when the mutineers unfurled the banner of revolt against a mighty Empire. The contemporary literature, however, gives a very different, rather baffling, picture, the sepoys have been held therein as seditious, perfidious, evil and wrong doers, etc [*sic*]. They were condemned in strongest terms by Indian journalists who are held as pioneers and doyen. The feudal class, on the other hand lent strong moral and material support to the imperial forces which crushed the uprising. The glaring contradiction does not find any mention in the textbooks of history of our times for reasons not far to seek, nor is it known to the generation of the day. (Biswas 1997)

Through these narratives of the past, the Dalits want to acquire power in the ongoing social struggle. It is also an attempt to reshape the fractured and competing pasts from the present and acquire a position of authority for themselves and other Dalit castes. This process of remaking the past is based on their contemporary, socio-political and cultural experience of discrimination, which they face in their everyday lives. They link their experiences of recent times with their remote past and authenticate the latter by establishing their historicity. Invention of history for the Dalits is thus a process of giving legitimacy to their identity by establishing sacrifice for the nation and the society as a tradition of their community. In this sense, one can propose that the past can be an authority but the nature of the authority is seen as shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention.

The Dalits also mention the names of freedom fighters from the Gandhian and Nehruvian era, men and women who became martyrs at Jalianwalabagh, in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Quit India Movement, the Chauri Chaura episode and so on. But in their popular discourse, one cannot find heroes who were involved in these phases. Dalit freedom fighters like *Amar Shaheed* Ram Chandra Bhangi (Movement against the Rowlatt Act, 1918), *Amar Shaheed* Nathu Dhobi (Jalianwala Bagh episode, 1919), *Amar Shaheed* Duli Dhobi, Mangal Mochi, Ramapati Chamar, Chhotu Pasi, Ayodhya Chamar, Sampati Chamar, Alghu Pasi

(Chauri Chaura incident,1923), Kallu Chamar, Shri Garib Chamar, Jagesar Chamar, Nahar Chamar, Falai Chamar, Birija Chamar, Medhai Chamar, Raghunath Pasi, Ramjas Pasi, Ramsharan Pasi are some names who participated in the freedom struggle, especially in the second phase of the nationlist movement. Dalit historians also present stories of *Amar Shaheed* Baldev Prasad Kuril (Derapur, Kanpur), *Amar Shaheed* Suchit Ram Jaiswar (Lal Kuan, Lucknow) and *Krantiveer* Vindeshwari (Gorakhpur), who played important roles in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In the same manner, they believe that in Vinoba Bhave's Satyagraha Movement, Baba din Kori (Mohanlal Ganj) and Narayandas Chamar, played an important role. They narrate stories of the sacrifices of *Amar Shaheed* Maikulal Chamar (Sitapur), *Amar Shaheed* Shivdhan Chamar (Azamgarh) and *Amar Shaheed* Hari Chamar (Balia) in the Quit India Movement of 1942 (Dinkar 1990: 41), but they do not appear important enough to be converted into icons. Almost all the Dalit icons, heroes and myths of the national movement belong to the 1857 episode.

Why is it important for the Dalits to link themselves with the 1857 war of independence and why are the icons related with this incident given more importance than those of other incidents? Why is 1857 so important for them? The reason may be that the events around this period are not well documented, so the Dalits find plenty of space to invent their history and posit their leaders. The 1857 Revolt is highly romantic with a lot of heroic characters who fought valiantly against the British using indigeneous weapons. This notion provides the opportunity to create heroic characters belonging to their community whose authenticity may be debatable but who can, nevertheless, stir up the imagination of people searching for heroes with whom they can identify. The events that took place in the 20th century on the other hand are very well documented since the leaders of that period tried to build up a unified homogeneous story of India's independence. This gave little space to the Dalits since the story was dominated by upper-caste leaders whom they had to follow. It is true that many lower castes lost their lives in the Non-Cooperation, Quit India and other such movements but the glory went to the upper-caste leaders who had organized them.

The 1857 movement was mainly confined to the northern part of India, which made it easier for the Dalits of this region to search for heroes so as to invent and situate their heroes in places with a heavy concentration of lower castes like in Awadh, Bundelkhand and Bhojpur. The memory of these events were not just part of Dalit memory but also a part of the broader collective memory of the region, which is reflected in the songs,

plays and other mediums of popular culture. This fact enabled the Dalits to invent their heroes and histories who could become both local heroes and identity markers for the entire community in its everyday struggle for dignity and self-respect. The Dalit leaders had understood that it was of paramount importance to link themselves with the nationalist narrative and assert their role in the freedom struggle. However they found it difficult to find space in the main phase of the freedom movement since, in the period when the struggle for dalit uplift had picked up momentum, their leader Dr Ambedkar had developed a rift with Mahatma Gandhi, the most important leader of this phase. Thus there was no option but to search for their heroes in the 1857 Rebellion so as not to antagonize the state, which legitimized the nationalist narrative. Since one of the catalysts for the emergence of a Dalit nationalist narrative was dialogue with the state, they could not afford to ignore it. They could neither negate Ambedkar and his narrative of the nationalist movement nor the dominant nationalist narrative which is projected as the foundation of the present state. The need to strike a balance between the two led the Dalits to search for their own heroes within the nationalist narrative. And the event which provides them the space to do so was the 1857 struggle.

Another reason why the Dalits found it crucial to link themselves with the 1857 struggle was to counter the allegations made by some intellectuals associated with the BJP that the Dalits were anti-national. According to these intellectuals, Ambedkar was against the mainstream nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and often supported the British. These idealogues tried to belittle the untouchables by stating that they conquered India for the British—the Dusadhs and Baheliyas fought for Lord Clive in the Battle of Plassey in 1757.[9] In a bid to oppose Dalit efforts to write their own history and rupture the mainstream nationalist narrative, the All India History Compilation Project, formed by the RSS for propagating history based on the RSS idealogy, held a convention between 17 and 19 July 1999 in Allahabad. In this convention the custodian, Moreshwar Neelkanth Pingale, opined that writing the history of Shudras, *gwala*s and tribals created hatred among sections of society and caused problems for an Indianized social life.[10] In reaction to statements like these the Dalits were compelled to assert their role in the 1857 Revolt. They stated that their association with the first war gave them an exalted position in the history of India's nation building.

That there was a difference in opinion among the members of the BJP-RSS was obvious when the Governor of UP, Suraj Bhan, in the same convention, rebuked those attempting to deny the role of the Dalits

in the freedom struggle and said that they had contributed, to their greatest possible extent, in the movement for independence. He added that if it was not for Balmiki, the writer of *Ramayana* who belonged to a Dalit community, no one would have known about Rama and Sita. He also mentioned the name of Jhalkaribai who in the guise of Rani of Jhansi, fought valiantly against the British in the first war of independence.[11]

Dalit politicians and Dalit intellectuals use history, memories and icons of 1857 in their discourses in various ways. First, when caste conferences are organised as an urge for identity construction, they publish posters and handbills in which the contribution of their caste heroes in the 1857 struggle is mentioned.[12] Second, they justify their demands from the State as reward for their role in the 1857 movement.[13] Third, during election campaigns, the BSP leaders highlight the contribution of those heroes of the 1857 movement who belong to the caste which they are addressing. Fourth, many castes, in their mass struggle against the prejudices harboured by the state, publish posters and pamphlets in which they mention their role in the 1857 freedom struggle. Many castes are still considered criminal tribes on the basis of old colonial acts that continue to be followed by the police although they have now been abolished. Such castes say that when the upper castes were busy collaborating with the British to earn titles of *Rai Bahadur* and grabbing land that belonged to Dalit ancestors, they (the Dalits) were fighting against the British. In anger, the British branded them as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribe Acts of 1871, 1896, 1901–02, 1909, 1911, 1913–14, 1919 and 1924. Although these tribes have now been denotified, whenever a criminal activity takes place, the police, acting on preconceived notions, first arrests members of these tribes (Dinkar 1990: 46). In reaction to this kind of State atrocity, these communities organize protests and publish posters and handbills in which they mention their role in the 1857 movement.

Among the many heroes projected, why did women warriors such as Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and so on, who were involved with the 1857 Rebellion emerge as icons of Dalit political mobilizations in Uttar Pradesh? One reason might be that when Dalit politicians, especially Kanshi Ram, set out to choose icons from among those present in the print culture written by Dalit writers in the 1960s to rupture the mainstream nationalist narrative, they chose women icons on whom they could carve the image of Mayawati as a powerful mass leader of the community. Since a woman was to be projected as a charismatic mass leader, the icons chosen were also women who were chivalrous and powerful and who could provide

symbolic power to Mayawati's image carving. The women were called *viranganas* (courageous woman) but, in the narratives and visuals, the womanly aspect was removed and only the chivalrous aspect was highlighted. In popular parlance they emerged as *veer* (chivalrous man) to glorify Mayawati's masculine qualities. Mayawati is addressed as *Behenji* (sister) by her followers, but for them the word is more an honorific term of address rather than a sign of her feminity. Mayawati's strategy also was to project herself as a brave and courageous person. Her style of speaking, epistemology of political language, everyday relations with bureaucrats and politicians is masculine and aggressive and free of feminine softness. Her attitude deconstructs the stereotypical notions about women. Contrary to this, the BJP portrays women as mothers or sisters having feminine qualities of sacrifice and self-effacement. These qualities have been glorified in religious texts and also in mainstream literature penned by authors like Maithilisharan Gupt (*abala nari teri yehi kahani, achal mein hai doodh aur ankhon mein hai pani*, vulnerable women, this is your story; in your breast there is milk, in your eyes there is water).

Kanshi Ram and Mayawati picked out Dalit courageous, warrior-like heroines from the 1857 movement as they would suit the image of Mayawati. By linking herself with these heroes, Mayawati wanted to give herself a place in the nationalist narrative and project her warrior-like characteristics so as to successfully engage in political battles with the SP and the BJP in contemporary politics. This may be another reason why warrior-like Dalit heroes with masculine images were chosen as icons. In government publications published during Mayawati's reign to highlight her achievements, these icons were portrayed as 'heroes' rather than heroines.[14]

Politics, Identity and Narrative

The Dalit ideologues and political leaders have been using the myths and stories of these heroines in different ways to assert their rights. One use of these stories is to put pressure on the Indian State to provide more benefits to the Dalits. The discursive strategy behind this kind of historical representation is to create a sense of guilt among the policy makers and leaders and thereby get more benefits from them. The Dalit leaders say that although freedom was won mainly by the effort of the Bahujans, the forward castes reap the benefits of that freedom. In the colonial period, the Dalits received fair justice from the British. Now, however, they are

being subjected to injustices. The Brahminists have hatched a conspiracy to let the dalits remain dependent and oppressed and not allow them to develop wealth, knowledge and self-esteem. They claim that the downfall of the dalits began after independence when the forward castes misused the independence to further oppress the Dalits (see Singh 1994).

This kind of play with the narrative has two uses. On the one hand, the Dalits assert their role in the national movement, while on the other hand, they criticize the nation that has emerged from that national movement. The other use of their narrative is to mobilize the Dalits and other minority communities under one political umbrella to create a vote bank and to corner a larger share in the power structure. It is interesting to note how narratives broaden the social base of parties. The Dalit narratives of nation making is based on a two-fold strategy. First, they would like to include in one narrative all the Dalits and other marginalized minority communities that have not been recognized by the mainstream nationalist narrative. Second, they would exclude forward and dominant communities and project them as selfish, opportunistic and as enemies of the nation. In this process, Dalits also began to include Muslims in their narrative. They say that the forward castes and the Brahminical system are responsible for the present poor condition of the Muslims too. During the colonial period, the Muslims were in a much better situation, but today, day by day, their condition is getting worse. The government that is dominated by Brahminical forces has been fanning communal tension with the aim of forcing the Muslims to leave the country.

The BSP, in order to make itself more inclusive and integrative and its narrative more dialogical, says that there are two classes of Muslims, high and low. Many artisan communities, like butchers, weavers and dyers, are considered to be lower by birth, while Syeds are considered to be of high birth. Kanshi Ram tried to include the low caste Muslims into the Dalit vote bank by emphasizing their lower position in Muslim society and inventing a history in which the lower ranked Muslims were lower-caste Hindus before conversion. According to statistics prepared by Dalit political analysts, in fifteen parliamentary constituencies in ten districts, Muslims are in a decisive position to tilt. In some constituencies, their population is between 21 and 47 per cent (ibid.: 8).

However it was not easy to develop a consensus on a politically carved metanarrative because the caste groups were fragmented and antagonistic with each other for socio-economic reasons. The social, economic and political tensions between some OBCs and Dalits are reflected in their caste histories and other narratives too, like in the narratives of the

Muslims and some castes like Bhangi, Dusadh and Pasi. These multiplicities and contestations in the oral narratives of the Dalits were, however, resolved in the written narratives which show homogeneity and consistency (Narayan and Mishra 2004: 23–24). The reason for this could be to build up an 'artificial memory,' writing being the precondition of the artificial memory that is called history. Levi-Strauss derived the hypothesis that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery and that, therefore, writing is the instrument of human enslavement (quoted in Kelin 1995). Today, the Dalits attempt to transform their position by constructing their own histories by snatching, from the historians, the legitimacy and authority to narrate histories and handing it to Dalit activists and intellectuals. In this process they change their positions from being passive subjects as treated by professional historians to active conscious subjects. There is still, however, a problem in the representation of their own histories. The histories that are circulated through the print media freezes their historical position, makes it static, and then transforms them again into passive and silent subjects. To turn themselves into active subjects of historical representation the Dalits have to continuously deconstruct their earlier positions and write new histories based on their changing aspirations and new social struggles for survival and progress. This phenomenon has appeared in Dalit history writing but, however, in a limited way. A comparison of the historical representations found in the booklets written in the 1960s and the ones written after the implementation of the Mandal Commission in 1988 shows a changing trajectory in their representations over time.[15] The booklets written in the 1960s mainly aimed at creating a space for themselves in mainstream history by narrating the glory of their heroes and caste histories. An example is the booklet *Virangana Jhalkaribai* by Visharad (1964), which is a glorious account of the role of Jhalkaribai in the First War of Independence (ibid.: 1–66). The booklets written in the wake of the Mandal Commssion, on the other hand, were highly aggressive and justified protective discrimination by claiming that they were needed to correct the historical wrongs committed by the upper castes who had kept them suppressed and had denied them access to education. As shown in Chapter 2, these booklets posited the logic that they had been the ruling communities in the past but the conspiracies of the upper castes had deprived them of their glorious status (Pawan 1997: 14). Thus, in both the cases, the historical representations found in the booklets written by the Dalits reveal a changing trajectory over time.

The written narratives developed by the Dalit political forces reveal a homogenization of the multiple caste and local narratives of the Dalits. They tell the history of the making of Indian society from a single narrative point that revolves around the *mool nivasi* (indigenous people) concept. They claim that the Dalits, OBCs, Muslims and tribals were the original settlers of this land, while Brahminical and forward castes were intruders. They came from other parts of the world and destroyed the habitat of the original settlers. In their invented narratives the *mool nivasi*s or the original settlers were the non-Aryans, which had been fragmented by the Aryans, leading to the downfall of the glorious Indian civilization (Singh 1994: 115)

The narratives produced a connection between the identity of the indigenous people and high civilization. This is not the identity of any particular caste but of various castes and communities called Bahujan. This is an attempt at creating a homogenous identity for heterogeneous castes and communities. The Dalit political leaders have now tried to write a new history in which they build on the racial theory of Aryans and non-Aryans and, by glorifying their past achievements, they try to negate the prevailing Brahminical notion that that the lower castes are capable only of undertaking menial jobs. They try to establish that the lower castes were rulers and makers of high civilization earlier, whereas now they are being ruled over by the Brahminical forces. The Dalit political forces thus propose that the past rulers of this nation should be given back their power. These narratives are also an attempt to emotionally unite the Dalits under one identity that could create a homogeneity within them. In order to include Muslims within this fold, Dalit politicians claim that the majority of the Muslims, that is, nearly 80 per cent, were the original settlers of India who had converted to Islam due to the oppression and injustice of the Brahminical system. Thus they too should join hands with the Bahujan Samaj and fight for their rights and dignity (ibid.: 65). The narrative points of the above mentioned politically motivated Dalit history are strongly influenced by the writings of western colonial historians and missionary activists-cum-ethnographers. In fact during the colonial period, many modernist and colonial state interventionists prepared the space in which dalits could think about their identity. In search of their identity the Dalits moved towards an image created for them by western colonialists and missionaries. The concept of *mool nivasi*, which appears in their historical discourse, is in fact heavily influenced by the missionary and colonial constructions of the history of the lower castes in Indian society.

It should be mentioned that it is not easy to find the *mool nivasi* discourse in the oral tradition of Dalit communities in northern India. It is a constructed history that appears in print and may percolate down to the grass roots in the future (Singh 1994).

The homogeneous metanarrative proposed by Dalit political forces as history may not allow for the heterogeneity that lies in the orality of various castes, communities and groups of the Dalits. It is however a political need for them to create a big alliance to fight against domination by the Brahminical forces in Indian society. In recent times, the field for power struggle among various groups in Indian society is the electoral democracy, which relies on the number game. That is why there is a need to broaden their mass base by narrating a metahistory for which they could include narratives of various groups and communities. This is, in fact, a political alliance formed by the alliance of narratives. Like other metanarratives, it is an attempt at institutionalization and legitimization and giving it a position of intellectual mastery. However the metanarrative, as proposed by the Dalits, is also a tool to subvert the position of dominance by the elite, Brahminical and powerful section of the society (ibid.).

HISTORY AND POLITICAL ACTION

The histories that are proposed by them are not passive and unconcerned with the people. Unlike the histories written by academic historians, they are active in the memory of the people, full of power to influence Dalits and mobilize them, politically, for making their future. Dalit political forces, who champion Dalit struggle against dominant Brahminical forces have successfully used the historical symbols invented in their electoral and political discourse for the mobilization of various Dalit communties under one banner. The use of Jhalkaribai in the Bundelkhand region and Udadevi in the central region of UP are examples of this use of historical symbols. Jhalkaribai, who was described as a maid servant of Rani Laxmibai in the novel written by B.L. Varma (1951), was picked up by the Dalits and given a larger than life image. They recasted her as their own heroine of the 1857 Rebellion and established her as the symbol of their active role in the freedom struggle (Vidrohi 2004: 79). The history, myth and memory of Jhalkaribai has been used by the BSP in their electoral discourse to mobilize the Dalits for their political empowerment in the Bundelkhand

region. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the Lucknow region where the history and memory of Udadevi, a Pasi *virangana* (brave lady) who was a close associate of Begum Hazrat Mahal during the 1857 Rebellion, has been successfully used by the BSP and the Lok Shakti Party (a Dalit party led by Ram Vilas Paswan). In Bihar too, this phenomenon can be observed in the Mokama region of north Bihar, where the myth of Chuharmal is used for identity construction and political mobilization of the Dusadhs (Narayan 2001b).

These are examples of how history assumes relevance and is being used actively for carving out the future of the Dalits. With growing democratization and with the struggle for acquiring power in the country, many more examples of the use of history as an influential discourse for socio-political and cultural empowerment of Dalits may be found. These new histories may prove themselves to be histories of the future and histories for the future of the Dalits, marginalized and subaltern communities in South Asian societies.

In the next few chapters we will see how women heroes that are being studied in this book namely Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi, are used by the BSP to mobilize both the Dalit communities to which they originally belonged and the Dalit community at large. Also to be analysed is the process through which the myths and legends around them that centres on the 1857 Rebellion are used for consolidating and asserting a strong Dalit identity and how they also help to build up the image of Mayawati as the bearer of the legacy of these heroes.

Notes

1. Oral interview with Bhullar, Godampatti, Shahabpur, UP, on 23 January 2003.
2. Oral interview of Ram Lakhan Pasi, Pasiyapur, Shahabpur, UP, on 26 January 2003.
3. Same as Note 1.
4. Oral interview with Avinash Choudhry, Kidganj, Allahabad, on 15 May 2004.
5. Recorded at the Baniya Sammelan, Allahabad, 6 October 2005.
6. *Dalit Kesari*, Allahabad, 14–30 June 1990.
7. Sumanshankar, *Himayati*, May 1996 issue.
8. S.L. Bauddh, *Majhi Janata*, 1: 8 November 2001, Kanpur, pp. 3–4.
9. *Asian Age*, Calcutta, 24 and 31 December 1995 and 7 January 1996.
10. *Hindustan*, Lucknow, 18 July 1999.
11. Same as Note 10.
12. Pamphlets published on the occasion of Nishad, Bind, Kashyap, Lodh Ekta Sammelan, 23 February 1997, Allahabad.

13. Pamphlets of the Nishad caste published during its conference in demand of its traditional rights on water and sand, 10–11 November 1979.
14. Mayawati’s speeches during election rallies collected from newspapers.
15. Analysis of Dalit popular booklets collected by Dalit Resource centre, Allahabad.

Chapter 5

Jhalkaribai and the Koris of Bundelkhand

In a village adjoining Jhansi, a play on the life of Jhalkaribai was being staged. In the play as soon as Jhalkaribai cut off the head of a British soldier, the audience applauded and began shouting 'Jhalkaribai ki Jai' (Hail Jhalkaribai). The village where this took place was a Dalit village predominantly inhabited by the Koris, the caste to which Jhalkaribai belonged.

Field diary, Narayan 2003

In the search for icons and symbols with whom the Dalits of UP could identify, Jhalkaribai has emerged as a significant one. The BSP projects her importantly in its mobilizational campaign, since she is popular in the Bundelkhand region of UP, as a hero of the 1857 Rebellion. It organized many functions and celebrations to commemorate her memory. One such function was organized on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's independence in 1997. What is interesting is that while the memory of Jhalkaribai was being celebrated in Bundelkhand and Allahabad, Rani Laxmibai was also honoured as one of the martyrs of 1857. The day was celebrated in some places as 'Gaurav Diwas,' in some as 'Itihas Diwas,' while in still other places the occasion was used for tree plantation.[1] In the celebrations honouring, Laxmibai there was no mention of Jhalkaribai; while in the programmes honouring Jhalkaribai, Laxmibai was either not mentioned or mentioned derogatorily. Both these characters are parts of the same story but they are remembered and honoured separately and in different forms by the communities to which they belonged. The celebrations around Rani Laxmibai were mostly organized by the BJP and the RSS and were largely attended by upper-caste communities, while those around Jhalkaribai were organized by the BSP and attended by lower-caste communities.

An interesting point to be noted is that the celebrations around Rani Laxmibai focused on her feminine qualities, which are much admired by upper castes, such as sacrifice, self-effacement, sense of honour and beauty. Even today these qualities are emulated by upper-caste women and looked upon as ideals to be acquired. On the other hand, the qualities of Jhalkaribai, which were projected in glowing terms by the BSP, were masculine, like bravery, chivalry and valour. Rani Laxmibai supposedly had these masculine qualities too. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan wrote, in the poem *Jhansi ki Rani*, '*Khub larhi mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi*' (The one who fought bravely like a man was the Queen of Jhansi). But the BJP and the RSS, in their electoral campaigns, removed the masculine traits and replaced them with upper-caste feminine traits of sacrifice and self-effacement. In quite the opposite vein, the BSP eliminated Jhalkaribai's feminine attributes and replaced them with masculine qualities. They highlighted the elements of power that underlay the masculine qualities of aggression and militancy. This became an important reference point for the political mobilization of the Dalits and justified the use of the myth of Jhalkaribai. The attempt was to create memories through celebrations of the 1857 Rebellion which suited the logic of the political forces and the target groups for which they were intended.

History, Memory and Celebrations

It was in 1907 that the history of the 1857 Rebellion was rediscovered by a group of nationalist Indian youths living in London. They organized a festival around the memory of the war on 10 May 1907, which they named *Yaadgari Diwas* (Remembrance Day). The idea of the festival crept into their minds as a reaction to British plans of celebrating the 50th anniversary of their victory over the 1857 revolutionaries. The government issued special volumes in memory of eminent army personnel and administrators who had suppressed the Indian rebellion. The revolutionaries were cursed and criticized in the dramas and lectures organized as part of the celebrations.

Veer Savarkar, leader of the Abhinav Bharat Revolutionary Society, was the person who thought of organizing the *Yaadgari Diwas*. He constructed images of heroes and heroines such as Nana Sahib, Maharani Jhansi, Tantya Tope, Kunwar Singh and Maulvi Ahmed Sahib. He developed a nationalist story on the events of 1857 and in 1908, he wrote a history of 1857 in his book, *The Indian War of Independence*, in Marathi,

which contested the British version of the same. Savarkar himself defined the motive behind writing such a history in one of his essays: 'The purpose of writing this history was to inspire people with a burning desire to rise again and wage a second and successful war to liberate the motherland' (Savarkar 1909: 5). He also expected history to place before the people a programme of organization and action in order to enable them to prepare for future wars of liberation. To preach such revolutionary gospel throughout India and for it to have conviction, he invoked the memories of the warriors of 1857. His aim in representing this history was to lend legitimacy and symbolic power to the proponents of armed national revolt against foreign domination. At that time the extremist faction of nationalists were denounced as criminal by the moderates. The Indian National Congress (INC) was also critical of armed struggle and was in favour of reforms and a peaceful solution to existing problems. The rediscovery of the history of 1857 was a political move devised by revolutionary Indian freedom fighters to set an ideal for the nationalists, inspire them and acquire legitimacy for their revolutionary political actions.

In 1928, *Kirti*, a journal published by a revolutionary group, focused its April issue on the revolt of 1857. In this issue, Bhagavati Charan Vohra wrote an article called '*10 May Ka Shubh Din*' (Auspicious Day of 10 May)', in which he emphasized that the day marked the beginning of the Indian freedom movement (as quoted in Singh, Jagmohan and Lal, Chaman 1991: 145). This thought was developed by the nationalist historians who viewed the 1857 episode as the first war of Indian independence. Socio-political forces, in the struggle against the British, thus seemed to construct and use history in the form of a story of the past. In this process, history was narrated in an exaggerated manner and it acquired the form of mytho-history.[2] Here, history appeared as a memory of things said and done in the past. In the telling of history, there appeared to be a search for similarities between the past and the present, with the past being depicted in vivid images that easily caught the imagination of the present and thereby arousing the emotions of the people. History is, thus, the reconstruction of the past in terms of the present.

Inventing Histories and Image Making

Nationalist historians and politicians portray Laxmibai as a towering, heroic figure of the 1857 Revolt. The portrayal conformed to the pattern

set by Savarkar for the heroes and heroines of this revolt. This pattern entails building images of valiant martyrs who were imbued with a strong sense of patriotism and were popular leaders of the revolt. Both the Hindu and Muslim sections of the Indian society accepted them to be as such. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his book, *The Discovery of India*, further developed a similar image of Rani Laxmibai. Littérateurs like B.L. Verma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, elaborated this pattern in their novels and poetry. Pandit Sunderlal also narrated the stories of the heroes of the 1857 revolt in his book *Bharat Ka Swatantrata Sangram,* which became very popular with freedom fighters and other educated nationalists who were concerned about the freedom of the country. This pattern of image making of national heroes was also followed in the print media and in government publications like *Amar Chitra Katha*s, popular calendars and drama (*nautanki*) booklets that were transmitted to the people in colonial and post-colonial India. History text books that were prescribed in schools, after independence, also employed the same pattern of projecting the historical narrative of 1857.

*Nautanki*s or musical theatre, which were extremely popular among the masses for their loud music, flashy costumes and melodramatic elements, also helped to spread the message of nationalism through stories about nationalist heroes and events of that period. Many of these *nautanki*s were composed and performed in the rural Hindi region, which not only helped to make the people aware of the 1857 freedom struggle but also raised consciousness with regard to the social vices prevailing in society. In Kanpur, the most popular *nautanki*s of that period were *Balia Ka Sher* and *Veer Balak* whose hero was Chittu Pandey. These were composed by Krishna Pahalwan and were based on the events that took place in Balia. In Lucknow, Kukkuji (another playwright) wrote another play on the Balia incident. In Kanpur, Aligarh and Hathras, the plays that were popular were *Jhansi Ki Rani*, *Zulm Ki Aag*, *Subhash Chandra Bose*, *Veer Jawahar* and *Netaji Urf Bangal Ka Sher*. *Nautanki*s that were based on important events that took place during the period, like the Jallianwalabagh massacre, and those that were about legendary nationalist heroes like Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Rani Laxmibai, also helped to develop a narrative of nationalism in the grass roots.[3]

It is not easy, however, as to find such mythical and legendary narratives about Laxmibai in the serious critical histories about the revolt of 1857 as in the nationalist mythical narratives (Stokes 1978; Mukherjee 2001). The nationalist narratives reveal a meta-history centred on the glorification of a hero. There were, however, no references to the role of Dalits in

this movement. Realising this gross omission from the pages of history, the Dalits began to write their own story of the revolt of 1857 after 1960. In their narratives of history, as described in Chapter 4, many Dalit heroes and heroines, like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Matadeen Bhangi, Chetram Jatav, Balluram Mehtar, Banke Chamar and Veera Pasi, were invented and projected as legendery figures who were more dedicated and patriotic than the established figures, such as Laxmibai and Kunwar Singh. It is, however, interesting to note that the Dalit narratives are not very different from the nationalist ones, with regard to image making and mode of description of heroes and heroines.

Myth, Memory and Story

The myth of Jhalkaribai, as narrated by the Dalits, is located within the narrative of 1857, in the 'war of Indian independence.' The myth is narrated as follows:

> There was a *dasi* (maid servant) named Jhalkaribai in the palace of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. She was a low-caste woman. When the British besieged the fort of Jhansi and started firing from all sides, Jhalkaribai suggested that the Rani should leave the place after securing her child (who was the heir apparent) to her back. She, on her part, would hoodwink the British by assuming the appearance of the Rani. The Rani accepted this advice and made good her escape with the child. The ruse worked and for a long time the British were uncertain about the true identity of Jhalkaribai who was posing as Rani Jhansi. It was much later that they learnt that the 'Rani' was in fact the maid Jhalkaribai. But by then it was too late and the Rani had already covered a considerable distance. (Vidrohi 2004: 56)

The myth is a part of the popular memory of the people of Bundelkhand region and is narrated in several versions. It has still survived in people's memory and it often resurfaces in folklores, folk stories and discussions at the village squares (*chaupal*). Most of the Dalit communities believe that Jhalkaribai was an incarnation of a goddess who had descended upon earth to serve the country. In the words of Raj Kumar Koree, a singer in the *Jababi Kirtan Mandali*, '*U to durga rahin*' (She was Goddess Durga). *Jababi Kirtan* is a popular cultural performance in this region and the story of Jhalkaribai and her brave deeds is a common subject of most *Kirtan mandali*s (devotional song groups). An example of one such *kirtan* is the following:

Jai Jhalkari Durga, Kali
Jai, Jai Ma
Angrezon ka garba tune
chur, chur kiya.

(Translated)

(Hail Jhalkari Durga, Kali
Hail, Hail Mother
The pride of the British
You shattered to smithereens.)

In an interview, Raj Kumar Koree informed that this *kirtan* was a recent composition in retaliation to the *Jababi Kirtan* on Laxmibai performed by the Suresh Singh Bundela Kirtan Party.[4]

Jhalkaribai was a real historical character and not a myth; but the memories about her vary between different communities. They are in a continuous process of reconstruction and modification, especially among the lower castes. This is so because it helps these communities to revise their identity and juxtapose it against that of the other communities. Contesting images of Jhalkaribai are still being circulated in the Bundelkhand region, and it has also become a theme of political and social contention. This can be illustrated from the fact that in Kachnara village in the Hamirpur district of Bundelkhand, the old and illiterate Ram Narayan Shukul, a Brahmin, subverts Raj Kumar Koree's version by saying that 'Jhalkaribai *koi khas nahi thi*' (Jhalkaribai was not very important). She was just a *Korin* and a maid servant of Rani Laxmibai. The two resembled each other physically. When the Rani came out of the fort with her army to face the British, Jhalkaribai dressed herself as the Rani and confused the British about her true identity.[5]

Addressing Jhalkaribai as a *Korin* reflects an upper-caste apathy and neglect, as the Chamars, Doms and Bhangis and Koris have traditionally occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy of Bundelkhand and are often used as derogatory terms of address. Kori is an untouchable Hindu caste whose caste-based occupation is weaving. Although people of this caste are distributed throughout the state, it is mainly concentrated in Bundelkhand, Ruhelkhand and other parts of central UP. Their total population was 1,381, 588 according to the 1981 Census. Kori appears to be a purely functional group made up of caste members who were either expelled from their own communities or who left on their own accord.

The word 'Kori' is derived from *kora*, which means 'coarse cloth,' and, therefore, refers to their occupation of weaving. Weaving has been the traditional occupation of this group but they are also engaged in agriculture. Besides, some are also engaged in skilled and unskilled labour and are employed in different government and private services. They call themselves by many names such as Koli, Kamal, Kamalvansi, Dhiman, Aharwar and Sankhawar. In some parts of Ruhelkhand they also call themselves Gupta (Prasad 1995: 23). Today, the Koris, like other Dalit castes, use the myth of Jhalkaribai for the glorification of their community. They also celebrate *Jhalkaribai Jayanti* each year to enhance their self-respect and elevate the status of their caste. It is a matter of great pride that she was a *Dalit Virangana* (brave woman warrior) born in the Kori caste and they highlight this dimension while recounting her brave deeds.

History of the Making of the Story

In the written historical record of that period, such as the diary of General Rose (leader of the British troops which attacked the Jhansi fort) and the gazetteer of the period, one finds no reference to Jhalkaribai. One can, however, find a mention of her in the book, *Majha Pravas*, written by Vishnu Rao Godse, who refers to her as 'Jhalkari Korin.' *Majha Pravas* is a travelogue based on the author's travels in the central part of India during the 1857 Rebellion. In the book she is mentioned to be a maid of Rani Laxmibai (Godse 1907).

Another reference to her myth can be found in 'Jhansi Ki Rani,' written by the eminent littérateur, B.L. Varma (1951: 255). He created a substory in his novel based on Jhalkaribai for which he interviewed Jhalkaribai's grandson. A detailed version of Jhalkaribai is presented here. Varma himself belonged to the Bundelkhand region. While depicting her character, he too addresses her as a *Korin* who reembled Laxmibai. He narrates the story as follows:

> There was a Jhalkari Korin. Her features, the contours of her nose, the colour of her eyes, her complexion and physical stature all resembled those of the Rani. The Rani liked her very much. Her husband's name was Puran Koree. She was not Laxmibai's servant but someone who was very close to her. She learnt archery, wrestling and shooting from the Rani and, later, became a member of the female army created by the Rani. Jhalkari inspired her husband to fight and die for the Rani and the country. Subsequently, he became a *topchee* (cannon operator) posted at the main gate of the fort. When Laxmibai proceeded to fight

> the British, the British began to chase her. Jhalkari, dressed as the Rani, approached the British commander, General Rose, who mistook her for the Rani and arrested her. Laxmibai was thus saved from being captured. The confusion continued for a week and it was only after it was revealed that Jhalkaribai was not the Rani that she was released. (Varma 1951)

In this text, Jhalkari is always addressed as a *Korin* and as an ordinary soldier in the army of the Rani; her name is not suffixed with *bai*. Other women soldiers of the army, namely, Moteebai, Mundari and Sundari, are accorded greater significance, although their rank was equal to that of Jhalkaribai's. In 1951, Ram Chandra Heran, a progressive writer in the Bundeli language, wrote a novel called *Maati*. This novel was not centred on Jhalkaribai but it gave a small narrative about her in which she was depicted as a chivalrous and a valiant martyr (Heran 1951).

The first biography of Jhalkaribai was written in 1964 by Bhawani Shankar Visharad, a Dalit intellectual. He picked up the story of Jhalkaribai from Varma's novel and, with the help of the oral narratives of the lower-caste people living in Nayapurva in the vicinity of Jhansi fort, reconstructed it. Visharad wrote:

> When I was a student of B.A. in Kanpur, I heard about Jhalkari. I developed the ambition to write a few words on her. In December 1961, I was transferred to Jhansi and after that I started working on the ambitious project that I had entertained for so long. First, I consulted various books. But the books were not sufficient to quench my thirst. I then decided to discover it for myself. So, I went to Nayapurva many times. Being on outsider, I had to wander through various lanes without achieving anything. But this did not deter me from my inner desire to explore the hidden materials about Jhalkaribai, instead my ambition was further whetted.
>
> Meanwhile, I happened to meet a social worker by the name of Nathu Ram Aarya. My perseverence and dedication stirred up his emotions and he extended his cooperation to me. As a first step, he narrated to me all that he had heard about Jhalkari from his maternal grandmother. Thereafter, I was accompanied by him to Nayapurva, again, where I met the residents of that area. We were successful in locating the place where Puran and his wife, Jhalkari, lived. We reached the place now known as Jhalkari Burj where they had been posted as cannon operators. We also saw other adjacent places.
>
> Then we met Mohan, a tailor master, who on being impressed by our efforts, took us to the office of Veerangana Jhalkaribai Samiti located at Manik Chowk, Jhansi. We succeeded in collecting some materials from there on the

> courtesy of Sri Damodar, a lawyer by profession. But I had the desire to look more deeply into the life history of Jhalkari. Meanwhile, the monsoon season came. With one Aryaji, we reached Anjani Toria, where Jhalkari used to practice shooting. While returning in the evening, we encountered a very old man who cast some light on the life of Jhalkari. After that, I again went to Nayapurva when, fortunately, we met a very old woman named Mannobai who belonged to the same *gotra* to which Jhalkari belonged. She narrated to me all that she had heard from her mother-in-law. With the help of Mannobai, we met Jugatreebai, the oldest lady in the area. She explained, in great detail, the problems which Puran had to face during the mutiny. Further information was provided to us by Sri Arjun Lal Richaria (former Chairman of the Veerangana Memorial Trust). He and Suraj Bhan gave us much information about Jhalkari. (Visharad 1964: 3)

Bhawani Shankar Visharad presented an image of Jhalkaribai which was as follows:

> Jhalkari was a childless lady. Whatever she did, she did it for future generations, for society, and for the belief in the Bhagwad Geeta preaching that 'Action is thy concern, not reward.' She gave priority to action and fulfilled her duty without any ambition for reward. She provided one of the finest examples of what is the duty of a woman towards a woman. Without caring for herself and putting herself in the jaws of death, she succeeded in getting the queen to move out of the fort safely. Thus, she provided another opportunity to the Rani for playing a role in the revolt of 1857. She set an example by breaking out of the confinements of the four walls and the *purdah* for women, and taught them the lessons of their larger role in history and society.
>
> Further, Jhalkari raised the heads and shoulders of those living in acute poverty and, yet had sacrificed their blood for laying down the foundation of freedom. A female, who had no respectable source of livelihood and no one to share her burden, awakened the slumbering soils, gave them encouragement and placed the community of women on a high pedestal. (ibid.: 33)

Since 1990 several booklets, dramas and songs have been composed by Dalit activists, politicians and writers, narrating the story of Jhalkaribai. Efforts have been made to rewrite and reread the story of Jhalkaribai with the avowed objective of placing her on an equal footing with Laxmibai. This can be seen from the following lines which have been written by Archana Verma (1997):

Macha Jhansi mein ghamasan, chahunaur machee kilkari thee,
Angrezon se loha lenein, ran mein kudee Jhalkari thee.

(Translated)

(Amidst the sound and fury of battle at Jhansi
Plunged Jhalkari to confront the British.)

These lines were an attempt to upstage Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's famous poem on Rani Laxmibai, which is well known and frequently recited. Sham Lal Baudh (2001) while narrating the untold story of the freedom movement in *Jhalkaribai Va Puran Kori* also subverts Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's projection of Laxmibai. Chauhan says in her poem:

Khub larhi mardani woh to jhansi wali rani thi.
Bundele harbolon ke mooh hamne suni kahani thi

(Translated)

(The one who fought bravely like a man was the Queen of Jhansi.
We heard this story from the mouths of the narrators of Bundelkhand)

These lines say that the glory of Rani Jhansi was narrated through songs by the people of Bundelkhand, who said that she fought like a man against the British. But, according to Baudh, the one who actually fought against the British was not Rani Laxmibai but Jhalkaribai Kori, who will always be immortalized in memory and history as a Dalit *virangana* (brave female warrior) (ibid.).

Many other Dalit writers and composers have narrated the myth of Jhalkaribai, glorifying her brave deeds. Bihari Lal Harit composed a folk ballad in 1995, called *Virangana Jhalkari*. Earlier in 1990, Mata Prasad, (then the governor of Arunachal Pradesh) composed a drama on her called *Jhalkaribai Natak*. It can, therefore, be seen that these writings further corroborate the argument that it is the reconstruction of history that is the driving objective of the depressed castes. Two important features of this process are clearly visible. First, literature is reinterpreted and recreated to reconstruct the identity of the depressed castes; and second, literature is made the entry point of a grand history, which the lower castes propose to write. Thus castes, communities and groups, while exploring their identity,

reinvent and reimagine myths, memories and the past. This is the space in which contesting political forces enter the arena of interpreting the past.

The storyline of Mata Prasad's drama (1990) on Jhalkaribai was as follows:

> Jhalkaribai was the wife of Puran Kori. The Koree *jat* (caste) had participated in the war against the British along with Laxmibai. The main gate of the palace, where Jhalkaribai's husband was posted, was guarded by soldiers of the Kori caste. Jhalkaribai was as courageous as Laxmibai and was her closest friend on account of which the upper-caste employees in the palace despised her and conspired against her. Jhalkaribai was an expert at wrestling and other physical exercises. She was trained by the Rani herself in horse-riding and shooting and was the chief of the Durgavahini, a women's battalion of the Rani's army. It was Jhalkaribai who advised the Rani to go out of the fort with her adopted son, Damodar, and conceived the plan of confusing the British. As a consequence, without caring for her life, she went up to Dantia fighting bravely against the British army. But, here, she was arrested and imprisoned for a long time till she was subsequently released.

In this narrative, Jhalkaribai was placed on the same pedastal as Rani Laxmibai. Both of them excelled in martial arts, the only difference being that Laxmibai was a queen and Jhalkaribai a *Korin*. According to this version, Jhalkaribai was treated by the Rani as her *bahin* (sister) and the Rani's military strategies were planned by her. It was on account of Jhalkaribai's friendship with Laxmibai that the conspiracies of the upper castes could not concretize. She was eventually arrested because of the treachery of Thakur Dulhaju. In this version, she is projected as a patriot greater than any person belonging to a higher caste (ibid.).

The upper stratum of society finds such an interpretation unacceptable because, on the one hand, Jhalkaribai is depicted as an equally significant strategist as Laxmibai while, on the other hand, a Thakur is characterized as a traitor. Here a depressed caste is, by the logic of facts, represented as being more patriotic. Not a single low-caste member, in this version, is shown to be a traitor.

Most of the Dalit writers have recovered the forgotten and almost unknown story of Jhalkaribai from the writings of B.L. Varma, a non-Dalit novelist. It was through his novel that the story of Jhalkaribai disseminated among the literate and educated people. Bhawani Shankar Visharad in the biography of Jhalkaribai repeatedly referred to Varma's description.

This new information was disseminated in the form of biography, drama and poetry, which were composed by Dalit writers. The dissemination of the story of Jhalkaribai has a powerful ideological motivation—a new form of awareness and a new attempt at defining identity and aspirations. One of the basic purposes of this kind of recovery of the past is to acquire legitimacy and a reconstructed identity in the new socio-political and cultural context.

Martyrdom and Dalit Narratives

Heroic narratives among traditional groups are intended to praise the hero/heroes and his/their achievements and thereby strengthening the morale and corporate pride of the group. The narratives need not be limited to historical elements, but may draw on mythology, religion or may even be pure fiction. Heroic narratives constitute the collective memory of the group and serve to direct and give focus to the loyalties of its members and encourage them to struggle for their newly carved identity. In modern literate societies, these heroic narratives appear as secondary narratives, which are more contrived, more literary and composed in an advanced state of civilization.

D.C. Dinkar (1990: 24–25) presents a very interesting story about Jhalkaribai. According to him, 'Rani Laxmibai had a lust for the crown. She was not interested in revolting against the British. Jhalkaribai stopped her from compomising with them. In fact she was the person who inspired the Rani to fight and struggle for freedom.' He further says:

> It would be unhistorical to remember Rani Laxmibai as a martyr in the freedom movement. Many historians make attempts to establish that Rani Laxmibai was killed on 16th June 1858 while fighting with the British. But in reality, the Rani escaped the colonial army with the help of the Maharaja of Pratapgarh, entered into the dense forest of Nepal Tarai and went underground. In fact, she lived a long life and died at the age of 80.

He also provides a picture of Rani Laxmibai which was printed in *Sudha* (a reputed Hindi Journal) in May 1941. This shows that in the manner of projecting the image of Jhalkaribai, there is also a tendency to distort the earlier image of Laxmibai as a martyr of the nation and the concept of her heroic death, which remains in the mainstream story of the Indian freedom movement.

Thus, on the one hand, there is an attempt to delete the narrative of martyrdom, which is associated with the popular image of Laxmibai. On the other hand, there is the glorification of the martyrdom of Jhalkaribai by various Dalit organizations. Recently Bharat Ratna Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar Janm Diwas Mela Aayojan Samiti, Allahabad, celebrated the 143rd 'Shahid Diwas' (Martyr Day) of Jhalkaribai in Allahabad. On this occasion, the narrative strategy of most of the speakers was based on three points:

(*i*) the projection of a nationalist dedication and heroism,
(*ii*) the weaving of the narrative about Jhalkaribai's heroic death and
(*iii*) the glorification of her martyrdom.

Dalit writers also construct the martyr-ology of Dalit freedom fighters in the 1857 Rebellion. In this martyr-ology, Jhalkaribai and Udadevi are glorified as significant contributors to Dalit heritage of dedication and patriotism. Through these narratives, the Dalits attempt to highlight their role in the freedom movement. Another purpose of the construction of a martyr-ology is to stiffen the endurance of survivors and induce courage and confidence in them. Martyrdom has been considered to be a supreme dedication for the nation. It symbolizes patriotism, which forms the basis of emotional nationalism. In both colonial and post-colonial nationalist literature, martyrdom has been highly glorified. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's famous poem *Pranati*, reflects this trend:

Kalam aaj unki jai bol
jala asthian bari bari
chhitkai jinne chingaari
jo charh gaye punya vedi par
liye bin gardan ka mol
kalam aaj unki jai bol
(As quoted in Kumar 1994: 5–15)

(Translated)

(My pen today is honouring them
Those who set their bones on fire
That ignited a bright spark
Those warriors who gave up their lives
Without demanding any price for them
My pen today is honouring them)

The trend of glorifying and valorizing martyrdom as a supreme sacrifice for the nation percolates down to the common people, making it a part of their popular imagination. Khare (1984) argues that certain segments of the untouchable society possess a well-developed self-awareness and are in the process of constructing new ideologies to support the kinds of action necessary to empower themselves.

Table 5.1 gives a chronological list of the books that have been written featuring the history of Jhalkaribai.

Table 5.1
Published books that feature the history of Jhalkaribai

Author	*Title of the Book*	*Date*
Vishnu Rao Godse	Majha Pravas	1907
Brindavan Lal Varma	Jhansi Ki Rani	1951
Ram Chandra Heran	Maati	1951
Bhawani Shankar Visharad	Veerangana Jhalkaribai	1964
Piyush	Jhansi Ki Rani Natak	1972
D.C. Dinkar	Swatantra Sangram Mein Achhuton Ki Yogdan	1990
Chokhe Lal Verma	Jhalkaribai Natak	1990
Mata Prasad	Veerangana Jhalkaribai Kavya	1993
Bihari Lal Harit	Veerangana Jhalkari	1995

It is not easy to find out whether the story of Jhalkaribai originated in the oral culture or in the print culture. In fact, oral and literary cultures exist side by side and mutually influence each other. Hofmayer (1993) emphasized that oral and literary cultures in colonial and post-colonial societies exist within unified social situations and are mutually interactive. The memory of Jhalkari, as prevalent today amongst the depressed castes, has been revived after much modification and manipulation. Brindavan Lal Varma made an effort to depict Jhalkaribai as she had existed in the memory of these castes before 1950. That it has undergone many modifications is evident from the writings of Ramchandra Heran between 1950 and 1960. Varma depicted her as courageous, chivalrous and a favourite of the Rani, but not as superior to Laxmibai in diplomatic or military skills. In the literature of the 1950s, however, Jhalkaribai's closeness to Laxmibai is attributed more to her abilities and competence. The jealousies of the higher castes too have been exaggerated in an artistic but vitriolic manner. Among the dramatists, writers and dance groups, this articulation acquired a new dimension and amplification in the 1960s. In the plays performed by groups having a larger number of low-caste artists, Jhalkaribai was projected as being equivalent to Laxmibai. This might have been because

they worked under a strategy instrumentalized by the depressed castes to reconstruct their history, which was to establish equivalence between heroes of the lower castes and those of the higher castes.

Many other factors also played significant roles in the formation of a Dalit identity and the forging of a new consciousness. Communist parties, which had a strong following in Bundelkhand, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, in the 1950s and 1960s, perceived a potential among the lower castes to conduct a revolutionary transformation in society. With the idea of inculcating self-confidence among the lower castes, they used cultural tools that highlighted the role of the lower castes in the making of nation and society. Popular leadership of the communist parties emerged from cultural groups such as popular theatre and revolutionary choral groups (*geet mandali*). The scripts composed by these groups had subplots based on lower-caste heroes, in conjunction with the established mainstream heroes of the nationalist movement. This trend created the space for the Dalits to magnify these subplots into main themes that could be used in future for identity construction. Support from political forces provided the lower castes with an even greater propelling power for engineering their identity in an assertive manner.

During the 1970s, many low-priced texts of plays on Laxmibai were published in Kolkata. To make these plays more attractive, romantic, and accessible, surrogate characters were highlighted. Frequent performance of these plays helped in the construction of a new memory among the Dalits. Conversely, the reactions of the people were collected by the writers and incorporated into these plays. This further helped in the construction of narratives, bringing out the identity of the lower castes in new contexts.

Commemoration of Memory and Legend

The Dalits of Bundelkhand also invented feasts, fasts, celebrations and commemoration around the legend of Jhalkaribai. They organized a function every year at Jhansi in the Fort of Rani Laxmibai to commemorate the memory of Jhalkaribai. A tower near Unnao Gate and Anjani Toria is named after Jhalkaribai. The Dalits of Jhansi have instituted a Polytechnic Institute in her memory. They have also created a Veerangana Memorial Trust to ensure the transmission of the story of Jhalkaribai. The BSP organizes the Veerangana Jhalkaribai Mahotsav every year at the block and district levels in the Bundelkhand region. The Dalit community has

constructed a grand statue of Jhalkaribai near the fort, which was inaugurated by Mayawati when she was the chief minister of UP.

The politics of celebrating historical legends is revealed by the fact that while the BSP commemorates the myth of Jhalkaribai, the BJP celebrates the memory of Laxmibai in various ways to mobilize its own mass base. The women's wing of the BJP has a special branch of activists named 'Laxmibai Shakha.' They celebrate Laxmibai Jayanti every year, when they sing songs and narrate stories and poems glorifying the brave deeds of the queen. Through these means, they attempt to transmit the ideals of Rani Laxmibai, like patriotism, femininity, loyalty towards the husband, religiosity (*deshbhakti, satitva, patrivrata and dharamparayanta*), which suit the party's ideology. During the BJP regime, the Ministry of Human Resource Development instituted an award in the memory of Laxmibai and Sati Anusuya (another legendary, ideal Hindu married woman). The BJP also organizes Maharani Laxmibai Jayanti every year, in the eastern and central part of UP. The Rashtriya Sewika Samiti, Kashi (a women's non-political organization influenced by the RSS ideology), also celebrates, the birthdays of historical figures like Jijabai, Laxmibai and

Figure 5.1
Facsimile of postage stamp depicting Jhalkaribai

Ahilyabai every year. In these celebrations, however, one can find no mention of Jhalkaribai, which makes the Dalits believe that there is a deliberate effort to suppress their historical role in these narratives and celebrations.

The myth of Jhalkaribai is not utilized only by the Dalits. The recent movement demanding a separate Bundelkhand state has also used the myth of Jhalkaribai in order to give colour and prestige to its political language. The Bundeli identity, which is the essence of the movement, politically relates itself with the myth of Jhalkaribai to win the support of the Dalits and the women of the area. This move can be interpreted as a political imperative of mobilization on a larger scale. The Government of India's Post and Telegraph Department also issued a postal stamp depicting Jhalkaribai (Figure 5.1), to satisfy the Dalit urge to construct their identity. Here also the myth of Jhalkaribai has acquired a political dimension and her image is being reconstructed in accordance with the demands of the social situation.

Politics of Myth

When the BSP was launched, being aware of the historical backwardness of Dalit caste consciousness, Kanshi Ram initially used personalities like Ambedkar, Shahuji Maharaj and Periyar to build the identity of the Dalits. This effort however met with little success, perhaps because an organic link between the middle-class intellectuals of the BSP and the members of communities living on the fringes of society was absent and that a sense of history was lacking among them. The BSP thus decided that the linkage between these personalities alone would not meet with popular receptivity. The strategy adopted for regions such as Bundelkhand, where the demographic balance was in favour of SCs, was to employ the myths of legendary Dalit historical figures. The character identified for this purpose was Jhalkaribai, who had a hegemonic presence in collective memory, so that an organic solidarity could emanate horizontally between the members of the community, and vertically with the elite of the community. Shivcharan Prajapati was the BSP candidate in charge of this task in the run-up to the 1996 election in UP.

In traditional theories of myth, the historical hero is paralleled with the mythical hero (Eliade 1989: 55). Here also a parallelism was devised between Prajapati and the valiant woman of the past, namely Jhalkaribai, in the manner in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2
A comparison between Jhalkaribai and Shivcharan Prajapati

Jhalkaribai	*Shivcharan Prajapati*
1. Dasi	Poor
2. Member of depressed caste (Kori)	Member of depressed caste (Kumhar)
3. Fought against the British	Fighting against the oppressive, hegemonic Brahminical order

The BSP infused Jhalkaribai with many mythical attributes that were aimed at revising the historical consciousness of the depressed communities. A question pertinent to this new scenario is how the BSP thought of and adopted this new strategy to mobilize the SCs and elicit a positive response from the allied sections of Indian society. The space for such an operational design was provided by historiography as it developed during the colonial time. Historiography was given a vertical framework and thus gradually became elitist. On account of its indifference towards the horizontal framework, we find Indian historiography lacking in multiple substantial facts. Three main schools that developed after 1857 were the Colonial School, the Nationalist School and the Marxist School. Colonial history writing is represented by Malleson and Kye in *History of the Sepoy War in India* and by P.B. Minturn in *From New Europe to Delhi*. According to Malleson, the failure of the revolt of 1857 was due to the moral lassitude of the Indians and conversely the moral rectitude of the British. The British were able to crush the revolt on account of their superior ethics. The significance of the mutiny of 1857 underwent serious modifications in the writings of nationalist historians, such as R.C. Majumdar and in the specialist monograph of Eric Stokes. In them we find the history of *zamindar*s, kings and *taluqdar*s along with an exalted narration of the role of the sepoys in the mutiny. Historians of the Marxist school like R.P. Dutt primarily view the scenario as being immature due to the lack of industrialization and its consequent class formation and birth of class consciousness. Even Marx sees the mutiny as an act of 'peasants in uniform.' Thus the voices of the people at the base of the pyramid went unheard, or were neglected (Guha 1993).

With the development of subaltern historiography, attempts were made to capture the layers beneath the surface. But in a heterogeneous society like India's, these layers were too many to be captured. This was one of the major factors behind the neglect and alienation of the oppressed castes; their aspiration to find a place in history remained unheard. Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar and others were aware of this but lacked a strategy to remedy

the situation. The BSP, however, has been successful in initiating this task, although it is difficult to predict if it will be smooth sailing due to the hidden counterpoising elements in the society. In the absence of history, the mythicization of personalities, the invention of a counter-history and the dependence upon memory became easier and more rewarding as was visible in the UP Assembly election of 1996.

Among the five planning divisions of UP, the Bundelkhand region has the largest SC population (80.6 per cent) whereas Uttarakhand has only 18 per cent (Prasad 1995). Before the 1996 election, the BSP had an alliance with the SP, which has deep roots in the Yadav community (12 per cent) and the Muslims (20 per cent) and had 67 seats in the UP Assembly. After its disenchantment with the SP, it formed an alliance with the Congress, which had lost its base in the state. Despite breaking away from the SP, the BSP retained all of its Assembly seats in 1996. Interestingly, in the Bundekhand region it won 47.61 per cent of the seats whereas the percentage in Uttarakhand was nil. In other regions, its performance varied in accordance with the percentage of the SC population. Second, as is the view of many upper-caste respondents, while parties like the BJP, the SP and the Congress spent huge amounts on exhibitions, banners and other modes of election publicity, the BSP spent the minimum amount and yet captured the majority of the votes. We can thus conclude that the memory of Jhalkaribai was an important determining factor. The efforts of the BSP, towards the glorification and mythification of Jhalkaribai in a reconstructed framework, can also be perceived as the politicization of an already existing memory to meet the political ends of the party. To accomplish this three modes of articulation were implemented:

(*i*) *Orality:* The political ends are communicated orally, a mode popular in the region and practiced from very early times.

(*ii*) *Visualization:* Plays, pamphlets and other kinds of literature that sketch out the caste's identity, are circulated amongst the people of the region. The statue of Jhalkaribai in Jhansi, built under BSP patronage during the regime of Mayawati, is made to resemble Rani Laxmibai, but in a much larger size.

(*iii*) *Ritualism:* Ritualism is observable in the organization of festivals and functions around the personality of Jhalkaribai. Such a commemoration has been a repeated instance in the past.

It is noteworthy that Jhalkaribai was brought into historical memory by an upper-caste littérateur, namely B.L. Varma, but contemporary

constructions of her myth are a reaction against the earlier representations. These representations now have a greater presence in the memory of the people, but these have been tailored according to the demands of political interest. In order to ensure the permanence of the memory of Jhalkaribai, many alluring features have been added to her personality. Authority depends upon legitimacy, and legitimacy in turn, depends on mass support. This support is elicited through the recon-struction and invocation of the past. Repetitive invocations add fixity to memory and for this both old and modern media channels are being used.

Notes

1. *Hindustan*, September 1998.
2. For further details on the concept of mytho-history, see Lewis 1967.
3. See U.K. Thapliyal (2005).
4. Interview with Raj Kumar Koree, recorded in Jhansi on 25 October 1998.
5. Recorded in Kachanara village, Hamirpur district, UP. This reflects the upper-castes psyche of denial of the role of the lower castes.

Chapter 6

Pasis, Dalits and Udadevi

It happened long ago. There were five Pasis. All five were very brave but they were always quarrelling with each other. But when they got together they shook the throne of Lord Indra. So it is imperative to evoke the collective memory of the Pasis and unite them. The Pasis have their own history of struggle and have their own heroes. What is needed is to present these heroes and histories in our political discourse when we go to mobilize the community.

Indrajit Saroj, General Secretary, BSP, at a lecture delivered at a conference of the local unit of BSP in Allahabad on 5 August 2005

As described in previous chapters, the Dalit women heroes of the 1857 Rebellion have become the symbols of Dalit assertion and pride. They have become the icons of the castes to which they belong, and it has become a political compulsion of various political parties, especially the BSP, to use their myths to politically mobilize the members of these castes. In Dalit political discourse, myths of different castes are also being used to consolidate all the Dalit castes and create a homogenous metanarrative. One such legendary character who is claimed to have played a significant role in the 1857 Rebellion alongside Begum Hazrat Mahal in the Lucknow region and who has become the icon of the Pasi community, but whose aura encompasses all the Dalit castes, is Udadevi. Among the various heroes of the 1857 Rebellion, she is one hero who has been taken over by the BSP to develop the image of Mayawati, who is claimed to be her incarnation. This message was put across to the people by putting up cut outs, posters and hoardings showing Udadevi standing beside Mayawati, at roadside crossings and important sites, just before the 2004 parliamentary elections.[1] The story of her brave deeds and heroic achievements during the 1857 Rebellion were narrated by

different BSP leaders at election rallies in various places around Lucknow where her myth was popular, so as to highlight the glorious history of the Dalits. While these stories were narrated mainly at rallies that were held in Pasi hamlets to arouse the caste identity of the Pasis, they were also narrated during rallies held collectively for all the Dalit castes in a particular regions adjoining Lucknow.[2] This chapter will examine the story of Udadevi and study how she has been transformed into an icon for Dalit assertion that is being used by the BSP for the political mobilization of the Dalits.

TELLING AND RETELLING THE MYTH OF UDADEVI

Nobody knows how true the story of Udadevi is. Contemporary sources do not reveal much about her. Academic histories belonging to her period give no sufficient reference or accounts of her. But the Dalits celebrate festivals in her memory; they have installed statues of her at various places in Uttar Pradesh; a fair is organized every year in Sikandarbag, Lucknow. Even political organizations have cropped up in her name. Yet, nobody can say with certainty whether the accounts of Udadevi are a part of the actual or the discursive past of the Dalits. Has she (or her story) become a part of the everyday present of the Dalits or is she a mere a political presentation? Is she a part of their present attempts to capture power through the constructed story of their nationalist past? It appears that the Dalits use Udadevi and her story in many ways, but the significance lies in the telling, writing and celebration of Udadevi. The story may simply be an attempt at a mythical reconstruction of the past governed by the present needs of communities. The needs may be imagined or real, national or not, but the story that is created is a historical narrative to suit the Dalit desires and expectations. The expectations in this case may be interlocked with the emerging aspirations of self-respect and identity formation among the Dalit castes.

Not only is a story transmitted from the older generation grandfather to the younger generation; many a times the reverse happens too. Certain stories are transmitted from the young to the old, and it is this parameter that is explored here to explain the transmission of the 'story of glory' (*gaurava gatha*), a parameter that has become common and popular among the lower castes. Rakesh Chaudhury, a youth of twenty-two years, from the Dalmau village near Rae Bareli, narrated the '*Pasi Gaurav Gatha*'

to me during my fieldwork in August 1998.[3] He told me that the Pasi caste originated out of the sweat of the great saint Parsurama. In the medieval period, many ruling dynasties of central UP were from the Pasi caste; and many brave Pasi men attained martyrdom during the 1857 Rebellion. He also narrated the story of *Virangana* (courageous lady) Udadevi, who was shot dead by the British during the 1857 Revolt. Shakuni Chaudhury, eighty years and the grandfather of Rakesh Chaudhury, on the other hand, glorified the history of the Pasi caste by narrating a story centred on the relationship of the Pasis with Parshurama, that is, about the lineage of the Pasi caste. Neither was he aware about Udadevi nor was he able to narrate stories of Pasi heroes in the 'War of Independence.'[4] Here, persons of two different generations have different narratives glorifying the Pasis. Although there is a difference in the tone and tune of the stories they narrated, the commonality lay in pointing out Pasi relations with saint Parshurama and stories of their royal lineage.

The question here is whether the stories of caste glory were transmitted from grandfather to grandson or from grandson to grandfather? Although it is very difficult to say accurately, it appears, from the narratives of colonial ethnographers (cf. Crooke 1896, who collected many stories about the origin of the Pasis, which project them as being a martial and ruling community), that the transmission is from the mouth of the grandfather to his grandson. This is because the stories that were being transmitted by oral tradition and popular culture were collected by colonial ethnographers and then published in the census, the gazetteers and government publications. Prior to them being recorded in the form of writing, these stories were in a fluid form, which was susceptible to multiple additions and deletions by the narrators and various interpretations. After being recorded and presented in the census, the gazetteers and colonial government publications, these texts became frozen and appeared as 'historical fact.' Thus, transmitted from oral tradition to the written world, they are once again circulated in the oral tradition of contemporary times as historical facts proposed by the Dalits themselves. In the oral tradition, these stories may have had metaphorical and folkloristic structures, but after being documented in the written form, they appeared as authentic textual facts. Some of these stories now appear as important sources of Dalit identity narratives. These documented and published stories are once again circulated in the oral and written histories and in the *gaurav gatha*s of Dalit castes.

THE PASI COMMUNITY

A prominent and widespread community of North India, the Pasis are an important Dalit caste in UP. They have been notified as an SC in the states of Bihar, Haryana, Orissa, Punjab, UP, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, the Union Territories of Delhi and Chandigarh and in some parts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and as far as south Mysore as per the statutory order of 1956. The Pasis of UP live mostly in the central region of Indian, that is, the Lucknow, Allahabad and Faizabad commissionaries. In fact, they reside in 305 Pasi-dominated subdivisions. The significant Pasi communities are: the Bahelias and the Bheels of Badaun; the Aherias and the Bheels of Moradabad; the Parasuraamees of Fatehpur and Allahabad; the Borias of Fatehpur; the Revas of Banda; the Bachhellias and the Bhars of Mirzapur; the Manvas and the Tramaalees of Ghazipur; the Chaurasis of Basti, Sultanpur and Barabanki; the Bhadaurias of Tarai; the Baanias of Lucknow; the Borias, the Mahatias and the Parasmanis of Unnao; the Borias of Rae Bareli; the Behar Dhanuks and the Khatiks of Sitapur; the Baanias of Gonda; the Chunaarh Dhanuks and the Khatiks of Baharaich and the Gujar Pasis of Lucknow and Faizabad. All of them claim to be descendents of the same source (Census of India 1971).

There are two different interpretations of the term Pasi. Crooke (1996) has recorded two popular versions regarding the derivation of the name 'Pasi.' Etymologically the term 'pasi' is derived from the Sanskrit word *pashika* which means 'one who uses a noose.' Pasis use the noose for climbing the palm tree for the purpose of toddy tapping. In Hindi too *pass* or *pasa* means noose. That is one version. According to the other version, which has been found to be more popular among the Pasis during field investigation, their name has been derived from the Hindi word *pasina* which means 'sweat.' There are different traditions in different areas in support of the latter version whose central theme is that they were born out of the sweat of Parashuram, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu (Census of India 1971).

Thus, the origin of the Pasi name is derived from different sources. One is associated with their traditional occupation of toddy tapping and the other with the mythological and glorious association with Parashuram. The fact that now the Pasis lay emphasis on the latter version shows that they use mythology to justify their supposed Kshatriya origin, which serves as a tool in social climbing. In fact, this tendency is further manifested in other interpretations that are given to the etymology of

their caste name, which shift from mythological to historical events, so as to justify their glorious past. Thus, during field investigations for the present study, a few Pasi elites in Lucknow who were associated with a social reform organization, the Pasi Jagriti Mandal, interpreted the term Pasi to mean a soldier. According to them the name is composed of two Hindi words: *pa*, which means 'grip' and *asi*, which means 'a sword,' implying, thereby, one who possesses a sword in his hand or, in other words, a soldier. They claimed that the Pasis are a martial community and, in the earlier times, they had joined militias and armies as fighters or soldiers in the defence services of the native princes of the country.[5]

As far as their occupation is concerned, in addition to toddy tapping, the Pasis are traditionally associated with a number of miscellaneous occupations. They serve as watchmen, tend pigs and do manual labour in the fields. Rose regards them to be a caste of pig rearers, professional watchmen and toddy makers (Rose 1991: 20). The 1931 Census Report of the Central Provinces and Berar recorded that the traditional occupation of the Pasis was toddy tapping but some of them were also huntsmen (Census of India 1931). The Census Report of the same year, mentions the Pasis of Mayurbhanj (now the State of Orissa), as migrants from Bihar, where they were toddy tappers, earth workers, hunters and bird catchers (ibid.). During the course of time, some Pasis in certain areas also took to a life of crime and the Pasi community came to be notified as a criminal tribe in UP and erstwhile Vindhya Pradesh, now merged with Madhya Pradesh (Ayyangar 1951: 33).

The Pasis are a predominantly rural community but slowly the need for education is growing among them. A strong sense of upward mobility is also visible among them. They do not want to carry their earlier image of pig rearers, which, it is said, has contributed to their being accorded a low social status. Another factor contributing to the discrimination against them is their reputation for criminal propensities. The Pasis seem to be much concerned by the present state of affairs, particularly in view of their glorious past of being landlords and rulers. They want their community to be restored to its respectful place in society. With this motivation, they have been taking measures from time to time to improve their status in society. Accordingly, in many areas they took the decision to give up pig rearing in an attempt at upward social climbing.[6]

The Pasis have also been sanskritizing their ritual order. Some *Panchayat*s have taken some initiative in this process. A few of them took to the teachings of the Baba Jagjivan Das of the Satnami sect. Some of the Pasi elites in Lucknow took the initiative in forming a caste

association at the state level, known as the Pasi Jagriti Mandal, whose main activity is to persuade the government and other local agencies to provide adequate assistance for the welfare of its caste, including educational advancement.[7] The Pasi community believes that, in order to become an effective socio-political forum, it is necessary that the community sheds some of its old caste prejudices and forges ties of unity. In order to do this, an organization named after their caste hero Udadevi, called the Virangana Udadevi Smarak Samiti, was formed, which is active as a forum for reflecting the new identity of the Pasi caste. The Pasi caste *Panchayat*, known as *Biradari* in the eastern regions of UP, *Jawari* in the western parts, and *Panchayat* in the central parts of the state, produces a group of caste elites such as *Chhota Raut* or *Chaudhary* and *Bada Raut*, who function as propagators of caste identity.[8]

PASI INVENTION OF HISTORIES

A major project of invention of histories is taking place within the Pasi caste of UP. It has been initiated, talked about, orally transmitted, and written about by the educated and semi-educated sections of the caste, like the activists and the socio-political elite. Also, the growing sense of power sharing, the urge of identity construction and the need for collective and individual self-respect provide the space for the transmission of such invented histories among the middle and lower ranks of the caste. The implementation of the Mandal Commission report and the contests and debates around the reservation policy, along with the rise and growth of *Dalit-Bahujan* politics in UP, have made the Pasis and other backward castes conscious about their share in State power and acquiring self-respect through history and political power. These histories are published in popular booklets, mostly written by intellectuals, activists and leaders of the community who are involved in the political mobilization of Dalits and downtrodden communities. For the most part, these histories percolate from the written to the oral medium through secondary orality.[9] The writers of these booklets claim that these histories have been derived from their surveys and documentations of the old mounds near Pasi settlements, residues of old forts of local kings, collective memories of the old people around these mounds and fortresses, and oral proverbs, stories and folk songs of the Pasi caste. Some of the episodes narrated by the Pasis as their caste histories seem to be derived from the caste history of the Rajbhar caste. However, many episodes, interpretations and inventions are new

and by-products of the recent identity consciousness of the Pasis as a Dalit caste in northern India.

The Pasi community believes in its golden age past. It emphasizes that the Pasi community had, at one time, ruled over a large area of Avadh. Centuries of Pasi history lies buried beneath mounds, ancient settlements and deserted places that were once densely populated. The Pasis, like other Dalit communities, have a strong sense of being neglected in the writing of the history of the nation. R.K.Choudhury, an eminent Pasi leader and minister in the Mayawati-led government, writes:

> Historians have not written books on the Pasi empire. Scholars have never identified the history of this chivalrous community for their research. Neither did the government departments, established for the purpose of protecting cultural heritage, ever attempt to collect information about the Pasi empire. Not a single book is available in libraries in which details about the Pasi empire are even mentioned. (Choudhury 1997: 3)

Some educated Pasis outlined that the British authors have mentioned Pasi rulers in different gazetteers and other books, but Indian writers almost completely eliminated those chapters from history.[10]

This sense of deprivation from history led the Pasis to invent their own histories. As the assertion for a new identity acquired momentum with the rise of Bahujan (Dalit) politics in UP, this feeling of negligence was sharpened. History appears to act as a very important constituent to their identity construction. After 1980, one found incarnations of many Pasi rulers, heroes and histories. It is not mere coincidence that it was in this time frame that the concept of the Pasi empire was emphasized strongly by Dalit intellectuals and leaders. Mayawati wrote:

> Among the Pasi rulers, the names of Maharaja Bijlee Pasi, Maharaja Satan Pasi, Maharaja Lakhan Pasi, Maharaja Suhaldeo, Maharaja Chheta Pasi and Maharaja Daldeo deserve to be mentioned in golden letters. But unfortunately, the history of these chivalrous and majestic kings has received only negligible treatment in a few books.[11]

Avadhesh Prasad, a leader of the Pasi community, and a former minister in the Mulayam Singh Yadav-led government, expressed the negative impact of the marginalization of this community in history. Without history and literature, communities cannot succeed in joining the mainstream of society nor can they find a respectable place in it. Since literature

opens the way for the future, a community without literature closes the door for its future generations. Sources of vision and contemplation are absent without literature (Prasad 1997). This feeling, along with the growing urge to construct an assertive identity and the sense of being deprived of history, led the Pasi community towards the invention of heroes, histories and myths and their documentation in the print medium.

It is interesting to know that despite being divided into various political parties, the intellectuals and leaders active in the construction of Pasi caste identity used the same methods of invention, use and reuse of history. In their lectures, writings and stories, one finds similar content, with a little difference in the narratives to suit their politics. The Pasi intellectuals involved with BJP politics highlight the marginalization of Pasis in the national history due to the false secular academic history writing. On the other hand, Pasi leaders aligned with the BSP and the SP, blame the forward castes for the social, economic and intellectual marginalization of their community.

The idea that myth and history are important makers of identity is not new. The shaping and reshaping of accounts of the past, with changing time, space and context, is a continuous process. In 1939, the Pasis started to form caste associations to consolidate all the Pasis together under one umbrella through their caste history and arouse the collective caste pride of all the Pasis. In this discourse around caste associations, invention of myth and history were the basic constituents. The main traits of this invention were search and research of Sanskritized Brahaminical myths. The Pasi attempt to link themselves with Rishi Parashuram is an outcome of their efforts to Sanskritize themselves and acquire upward mobility in the rigid Brahminical caste system.

THE MAKING OF UDADEVI

The story of Udadevi and the Revolt of 1857 has been narrated as follows:

There was a peepal tree, heavy and thick, at the centre of Sikanderbagh in Lucknow. Under it were kept earthen vessels, many filled with cold water. When the bloodshed in the battle stopped, many soldiers went there to rest, quench their thirst and enjoy the cool shades of the tree. Under this tree, many British soldiers, belonging to the 53rd and 59th regiment of the British army, were found lying dead. But Dawson (Captain of the British army troop) noted that from the wounds of the soldiers, it was evident that the bullets that hit and killed them had been fired from above. Captain Dawson soon came out of the shade of the tree and called Wallace so as to confirm whether there was someone on the

> tree. He said that the death of the British soldiers in the battlefield did not occur on account of attacks by bullets from the opposite direction, but by bullets fired from above the tree. Wallace had with him his loaded gun. Cautiously moving backwards, he started searching for the person on the tree. Immediately, he called out to Captain Dawson, saying that he had seen a person and, lifting his gun, he said that he would fulfill his promise before God. Thereafter, he fired at the target and the body of a person fell on the ground. This person was wearing a red coloured jacket and a tight trouser of rose colour. When the person fell on the ground and the jacket was removed, it was discovered that the person was not male but female. She had two pistols of an old model. Of these, one pistol was full of cartridges and other was exhausted. She had in her pocket live cartridges, which had been manufactured very cautiously. When Wallace saw that the dead body was not of male but female, he started weeping, saying, 'Had I known that she was a woman I would have died thousand times but never harmed her.' This lady was none other than Udadevi.

This story is being narrated by the Pasis who believe that this incident took place on 16 November 1857.[12]

The Pasis of the region believe that Begum Hazrat Mahal, in the struggle for freedom, organized an army of women soldiers after her husband's arrest. According to popular belief, the commander of this army was Udadevi. She belonged to Ujrion village near Lucknow. Her husband Makka Pasi was also a soldier in the army of Hazrat Mahal. He laid down his life while fighting the British at Chinhat. In this battle, Begum Hazrat Mahal herself participated, accompanied by Udadevi. It is said that the Begum herself looked after the wounded soldiers and covered shrouds on the bodies of the martyrs. Udadevi suddenly shuddered on seeing dead body of her husband, Makka Pasi, and wept bitterly. It was then that Udadevi vowed to avenge the killing of her husband, and this resulted in the killing of 36 British soldiers from the top of a tree and her subsequent martyrdom (Dinkar 1990: 35). The East India Company had made General Campbell the commander and sent him to Avadh. He was the same Campbell who, on his way to Lucknow from Kanpur, was defeated thrice by the Pasis of Amethi-Banthara. In the fourth attempt, when Campbell was successful in proceeding forward, he first converted the fort of Maharaja Bijlee Pasi into a military cantonment. On 10 November 1857, Campbell reached Dilkusha from the fort of Bijlee Pasi. As per the plan, he was to meet General Outram and Henry Havelock at Moti Mahal in Lucknow. But due to their fear of facing brave Indians, he changed his route. It was on this new route that his forces encountered Udadevi and her troop of women soldiers (ibid.).

This story about the role of the martyr, Udadevi Pasi, in the revolt of 1857 finds no mention in the stories collected by colonial ethnographers but seems to have been developed later. The 1971 Census records mention that, according to the Pasi respondents, a Pasi *paltan* (a platoon) rescued Begum Hazrat Mahal from being arrested by the British duing the 1857 Revolt (Census of India 1971: 2). From 1980 onwards, the story of Udadevi began to emerge out of the story of Begum Hazrat Mahal. After 1990, with the formation of the Virangana Udadevi Smarak Sansthan, this story found organizational support for its transmission and celebration. It is narrated in the Lucknow region of central UP, which is still, demographically, Pasi dominant. From these narratives has also emerged the iconography of Udadevi. Since she was linked with a Muslim woman—Begum Hazrat Mahal—she is described as wearing a long skirt and a head cloth and holding a pistol in her hands. Motivated by the same tale, the statue shows her wearing a short-sleeved blouse (as opposed to the attire of an upper-caste Hindu woman) and is projected as an average Pasi woman (Figure 6.1).

After 1990, the UP Government made an attempt to remember the 1857 Revolt at Lucknow and a committee named Swatantrata Sangram Smarak

Figure 6.1
A statue of Udadevi at Sikanderbagh, Lucknow

Samiti was formed. The Mayor of Lucknow was elected as its president. Under the supervision of this *Smarak Samiti*, the statue of an unknown *virangana* of 1857 was unveiled in Sikanderbagh. Around 1995, prominent members of the Pasi caste, political leaders and other renowned personalities formed a committee named Virangana Udadevi Smarak Samiti. The same statue was unveiled by Ram Vilas Paswan but this time the statue which had previously been anonymous had the name 'Udadevi Pasi' written on it. The statue was inaugurated for the third time by Kalyan Singh, who was the chief minister of UP at the time, and its new identification became 'Udadevi'. Now every year, 16 November is observed as Udadevi Martyrdom Day for which a conference is organized of people belonging to the Pasi caste, a souvenir is published and Pasi *Ekta* (unity) rallies are organized as a token of remembrance of *virangana* Udadevi.

Observing the Pasi phenomenon of inventing and constructing their own histories, the joint secretary of the Virangana Udadevi Smarak Samiti, Jagjivan Prasad, wrote that whether a child or an old man, a farmer or a worker, a subordinate, an officer or a businessman, every member of the Pasi caste was eager to regain his or her lost pride. Even the *kazi*s, *mullah*s, *pandit*s, politicians and leaders talk about the pride of the Pasis. All of them recall the forgotten history of the Pasi caste by either publishing their history or distributing it. Some launch a cassette or make a film. Some compose an *alha, geet* or a *birha* (different kinds of folk songs) or write or direct plays. Some install statues of Pasi kings or Pasi *virangana*s, while others get involved in the beautification or governmentalization of the forts of Pasi kings (Prasad 1997: 18–19). Prasad further mentioned the issuance of a stamp on Bijli Pasi by the Department of Post and Telegraph and the local MLA, Sri Kamla Prasad Rawat's donation of his official residence in Lucknow for the establishment of the office of Virangana Udadevi Memorial Institute. Pasi people believe that not only their caste people but all people would feel grateful for such good deeds done in the welfare of society (ibid.).

The myth of Udadevi has become popular among the people through the erection of her statues and the construction, reconstruction and dissemination of history and stories about her. Various poems have also been composed describing her historic contribution to the Indian freedom movement. One such poem by Rawat (1997) is as follows:

Desh ki Khatir Udha Devi Ladi thi Ladai
Saikaron Angrezon ko Udha Din Girai
Seenen pe Goli Khayee, Nahi Haar Manee
Rahe Doodh ka Doodh Paanee ka Panee

(Translated)

(Uda Devi fought for the country
Uda Devi killed hundreds of Britishers
Faced the bullets but accepted not defeat
What could not happen was injustice
This is pure milk Unadulterated)

The form and narrative plots constructed about Udadevi are similar to the nationalist stories created by nationalist historians such as Vir Savarkar and Pt. Sunder Lal. The rhetorical devices such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or irony in both the narratives are used in a similar fashion. The pattern of description of chivalrous women freedom fighters of the 1857 Revolt was set by Savarkar (1909) in his book *The Indian War of Independence*. He compared Rani Laxmibai to the Goddess Durga, the destroyer of enemies and used various rhetorical devices such as dramatic dialogue, sense of exclamation and so on in his construction of the story. In 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his famous book *The Discovery of India*, picked up similar narrative plots but with certain rationalizations. In his brief description of the appearance of Laxmibai he says:

> One name stands out above others and is revered still in popular memory, the name of Jhansi Ki Rani, a girl of twenty years of age, who died fighting. 'Best and bravest of the rebel leaders,' she was called by the English General who opposed her. (Nehru 1946)

S.C. Sarkar, an eminent historian, also uses similar narrative techniques to bring out the chivalrous image of Rani Laxmibai: 'In a battle (17 June 1858) the queen died fighting with bravery, dressed as a male. Sir Hume took her to be the brightest and bravest army leader' (Sarkar 1951).

The above mentioned narrative forms, rhetorical devices and story-telling filtered down to the Dalit writers too, who were in search of an alternative history to the mainstream nationalist history. In 1997, Sushila Saroj, a Dalit activist and ideologue, in a Hindi essay, used a similar narrative pattern and rhetorical device about Udadevi (Saroj 1997: 7).

The narrative plots that emerge are follows:

(*i*) They depict the existence of the bravery of a male in a female.
(*ii*) They reveal the acceptance of defeat amidst victory by the British commander.

(*iii*) They introduce the character of the heroine in a dramatic style.
(*iv*) They lay more emphasis on story telling than attempting to present academic research.
(*v*) Apart from narrating the bravery of the person in the struggle, they are also a tribute to the slain for their sacrifice to the nation.

In both groups of narratives, that is, the nationalist and the Dalit, one cannot find much difference in the form of the presentation of the event. Both use storytelling techniques, rhetorical devices and create a hierarchical arrangement between various historical groups, although the location of the storyteller, the historian and the way of emplotting the events in the story may be different.

Power of the Past

Like any other construction of myths, the construction of the myth of Udadevi was aimed at identity formation and dissent. Thus it cannot be said to be a pure and simple invention of history. The inventions of stories based on historical events, have social and political causes behind such inventions, which make them alive and effective in terms of mobilizing people who identify themselves with the concerned stories. The myth of Udadevi is also being used for the political mobilization of the Pasi community and this act of myth creation makes it relevant in terms of identity formation, memory and caste history.

On 13 March 1997, the Virangana Udadevi Smarak Sansathan, an organization involved in mobilizing the Pasi community on socio-political issues, organized two big rallies in Hasanpur and Khetni near Hardoi (Prasad 1997). On 7 February 1997, it held a big Pasi conference in Haidar Garh, presided over by the BSP leader, Sri R.K. Chaudhury. In this conference, white sarees (*dhoti*s) were distributed among the widows, and those students who had excelled in their high school examination were awarded (ibid.). On Udadevi Memorial Day (15 June), the same year, a big Pasi *sammelan* was organized in Bhiti by the people of the Pasi caste (ibid.). On 28 September 1997, in Arjun Ganj, Lucknow, people of the Pasi caste celebrated Udadevi Gaurav Diwas. It was here that the flag of the Pasi caste, rose in colour with the symbol of the sword and spear, was hoisted for the first time (ibid.).

Not only have the elites of the Pasi caste, but various political parties too—the BSP, the SP, the Lokshakti Party and the BJP—have used the

myth of Udadevi for mobilizing Dalits, especially the Pasis. In 1997, on the occasion of Virangana Udadevi Smriti Diwas, a big rally was held in Mohan Lal Ganj under the leadership of the SP president, Mulayam Singh Yadav (Prasad 1997). Similarly, under the leadership of Mayawati, R.K. Choudhury, and the Lokshakti president, Ram Vilas Paswan, many Dalit and Pasi rallies were organized in various parts of the Avadh region of Uttar Pradesh.[13] Soon after his expulsion from the BSP due to political differences with Mayawati, R.K. Chaudhury formed a new regional political party named Lok Parivartan Party. He also formed the Udadevi Force (UDF), an organization of Dalit women formed to struggle against everyday atrocities on Dalit women. Activists of UDF were supposed to wear a special dress designed by the organization itself (Choudhury 2001). Chaudhury has also written a book on the history of the Pasi caste, titled *Pasi Samrajya*, in which he has created a very appealing history of Udadevi (Chaudhury 1997). Just like R.K.Chaudhury, Ram Vilas Paswan (Lokshakti Party), Mayawati (BSP), Mulayam Singh Yadav (SP) and even the BJP, through its leaders belonging to the Pasi caste, have in the past attempted to utilize this myth in their favour by reinterpreting the story of the myth in a particular way, infusing it with politically correct meanings in it, and organizing celebrations around it. The BJP leader, Ram Pal Rajvanshi, then a minister in the Kalyan Singh-headed BJP government, projected Udadevi as a symbol of the bravery of Hindu women.[14] However, Mayawati and R.K. Chaudhury present her story as an instance of Pasi (Dalit) glory (ibid.). Most of them have similar interpretations of the myth but claim their own political right to use it by organizing celebrations around this very myth. Indeed, every aspirant of Pasi votes wants to capture the symbolic power that lies in the myth and use it in political mobilization. This depends on who succeeds in using it most efficiently, that is, with the help of newspapers, writing, publishing booklets, organizing festivals or using other modern means of communication. However, the success of the myth in transforming its symbolic power into political influence is yet to be tested.

THE ELECTORAL MARKET AND THE USE OF HISTORY

The term electoral market is used here not to denote economic functions linked with electoral politics but to reflect the vigorous marketing of popular strategies aimed at mobilizing castes and communities to vote

in favour of concerned political forces which are active in the democratic electoral politics of the State. It is noteworthy that after the implementation of the Mandal Commission, a new phenomenon developed in the electoral market of Indian politics—many lower castes and Dalit groups became more assertive about their political identity and became more conscious about the need for a share in the power of the nation-state. They became aware that power lay in the vote bank of their own castes, combined with the electoral effect of mobilizing their castes under a Bahujan-Dalit identity. That is why they required double identity—as a specific caste and as a part of the Dalit political community.

This double identity required a new history, which was different from and sometimes subversive to the Brahminical model of caste history writing popular during the colonial period. The Dalits needed to create caste histories which could provide self-respect to their caste's g*aurav gatha*s, not through Brahminical, sanskritized symbols but by their Dalit symbols and their Dalit socio-cultural location in society. One can find traces of the sanskritization in their narration of caste histories, but the move towards the glorification of Dalit status is visible in contemporary history writings. This hybrid form of history creates problems in mobilizing Dalits as a homogenous Dalit political group. It also paves the way for Brahminical political forces to enter into the dalit space to mobilize them in favour of parties like the BJP. This is evident in the case of the manner in which the Pasis' invented histories have been exploited. Their memory of Pasi as a martial race provided the space for Brahaminical forces to reconstruct their histories as great warriors and gatemen of Hindu temples during the reign of the Muslim kings in India.[15]

But for the Chamars this is not the case. This dilemma does not affect them because they do not glorify their martial status. Their strategy of history making is to glorify the work culture of their caste and narrate their Brahminical oppression while telling the story of their sufferings. In fact, politically speaking, the forces involved in contemporary Dalit mobilization are in need of a grand, unifying metahistory, of a particular caste which may be projected as a historically important Dalit community that had sacrificed a lot for the cause of the nation. The Pasis' attempts to project themselves as a Dalit caste seem to be successful; there are, however, many contradictions in the construction of a Dalit history out of their imaginings of their own history. In northern India, the Dalit community is not homogenous. A sense of hierarchy and relations of domination and subordination also exist within the Dalit community.

So developing a unificatory Dalit history which represents the identities of more than 6,000 heterogeneous and sometimes contesting Dalit castes cannot be an easy task. The Pasis glorify their role as a martial caste, as *gorait*s (gatemen), *chowkidar*s, *dafadar*s and tax collectors in North Indian peasant society. But as was pointed in Chapter 4, the Chamars, another major Dalit caste, criticize the role of the Pasis, who in the process of collecting taxes, oppressed other Dalit castes in the interest of their colonial lords. But in these new political conditions, the Pasis seem to be eager to minimize these contradictions. They say:

> It is true that for many years, in eastern and central UP, the honour, dignity and possessions of the Chamars have been safeguarded by the Pasis. And the Chamars managed to survive only because of the existence of the Pasi community in nearly twenty-five districts of UP. Even today the government coffers, courts, *kutcherie*s and prisons are safe only because they are guarded by brave, martial Pasis. More than two-thirds of the prisons of UP have Pasi watchmen. (Pasi 1997)

To ensure political mobilization, the Dalits required a unificatory history, which could provide them with a respectful identity in society and also bring the divided Dalit castes, and the various subdivisions within the caste itself, under one identity. And the extension of this homogenous identity should lead towards the mobilization of a new kind of non-Brahmanic-Bahujan-Dalit politics. To pursue this hope of an integrative and unified identity, the Dalits began to their ethno-histories, which could provide them with various kinds of symbolic power, and which could also lead them towards a homogenous Bahujan-Dalit mobilization in contemporary North Indian politics. Thus the ethno-history writing projects of Dalit groups in North India aim at acquiring self-respect through their invented histories which could be the foundational basis of their identity construction, and whic could ultimately help them to acquire a share of State power through electoral mobilizational politics. This project was precipitated by the myth of Udadevi who had been projected first as an icon of the Pasi community and then as a symbol of the identity assertion of the Dalits as a whole. Therefore, just as the myth of Jhalkari*bai* was used to mobilize the Koris and the Dalits together in the Jhansi and Bundelkhand regions, so also the myth of Udadevi was used on similar lines, as a symbol culled out and used to build the image of Mayawati in the Lucknow region. This also served the BSP compulsion to electorally mobilize the Pasis and also to homogenize all the Dalits.

Notes

1. Field visit to Lucknow, 23 March 2004.
2. Field visit to Mohanlalganj, Bahraich, 24 March 2004.
3. Oral interview with Rakesh Chaudhury, Rae Bareli, 9 June 1998.
4. Oral interview with Shakuni Chaudhury, Rae Bareli, 9 June 1998.
5. Oral interview with members of the Pasi Jagriti Mandal at Mohanlalganj on 5 August 2001.
6. Same as Note 5.
7. Interviews with Ram Lakhan Pasi and Jagjiwan Pasi in Lucknow on 5 August 2001.
8. Same as Note 7.
9. See Ong 1982: 31 for more details on secondary orality.
10. Same as Note 7.
11. See Mayawati Sandesh in Chaudhury 1997.
12. Oral narratives with Rakesh Chaudhury and others at Rae Bareli on 9 June 1998; See also Chaudhury 1997; Narayan and Misra 2004.
13. 'Kiska Vote Bank Banega Pasi Samaj,' *Hindustan*, 24 July 2001, Lucknow.
14. See RSS pamphlets distributed among the Dusadhs and the Pasis caste in Gaya district of Bihar during Samajik Samrasta Abhiyan, 1995.
15. Same as Note 14.

Chapter 7

Women Heroes, Goddesses and Politics of Image Making

There was once a Dalit king in the Pratapgarh Zila. The king was a *Chakravarty* (king of a very large territory). His glory used to be sung all over the land. He was just and kind and everybody had work, food and clothes. The king had all the qualities necessary in a good king and, under his supervision, the moral code used to be followed. The king had a minister who was a Thakur. He was a great conspirator. The king was intelligent but not a good strategist. The minister conspired against the king, removed him from the throne and usurped the throne for himself instead. He also banished the king, who took shelter in a forest.

Today's modern-day kings are the descendants of the conspiring minister and we are the descendants of the Dalit king who was exiled to the forest.

'Dalit Samrajya,' A Nautanki composed by
Babulal Bhanwra, a member of the Jagriti Dasta, BSP

On 29 September 1998, a rally was organized by the BSP at the Hazrat Mahal Park grounds in Lucknow. The centre of attraction was Mayawati. While delivering her speech, all the supporters who had come to attend the rally gave her their undivided attention. The crowd was focused entirely on her, forgetting their hunger, thirst and the discomfort of sitting in the sun. The women at the rally had come only to get a glimpse of Mayawati. They shoved and pushed to get close to her and feel her aura.[1] A large number of cassette shops had also been set up at the park, housed in makeshift stalls. Their owners were BSP supporters who had come from different parts of the state. The most popular cassettes were of songs about the Buddha, Dr Ambedkar and Dalit women icons like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Avantibai, Pannadhai and Mahaviri Bhangin, set to the tunes of popular Hindi film songs and to the folk metres of

Figure 7.1
A statue of Jhalkaribai in Jhansi

Doha, *Chaupai*, *Kajari* and *Biraha*. Posters, photographs, badges, lockets and other accessories with the images of these icons were also being distributed among the people. Popular booklets containing speeches of Dr Ambedkar and the life stories of Dalit heroes were also being sold from temporary stalls set up along the perimeters of the park.

As part of the rally, a folk singer sang a paeon in the glory of Dalit heroes. Before beginning his songs, the singer gave an introductory speech to the audience which was as follows:

> The history of us Dalits has been one of pride and glory. We were once kings of large kingdoms, and had a lot of power. Many saints and wise men were born into our castes. Dalit brothers, because of the *Manuvadi* (followers of the Manu Samhita) conspiracy of the upper castes, we are in this terribly degraded condition today. Many chivalrous kings were born in our communities who got the better of their enemies. Many of our brave soldiers chopped British soldiers into little pieces like vegetables. In the 1857 Revolt, brave Dalits like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai, Avantibai, Pannadhai, Mahaviridevi, and so on fought bravely to free their motherland from the clutches of the British and almost forced them to flee the country. They succeeded in staying on and ruling our country because the upper-caste kings and feudal landlords, as an outcome of their own vested interests, created the conditions for them to stay on. Today, our sister, Mayawati,

> has come as their incarnation to fight against anti-Dalits like Mulayam and other *Manuvadi*s. Dalit brothers, it is time to awake, arise and support her to capture the power that has been denied to us for so many centuries.

This folk singer was not merely a singer but also a member of the *Jagriti Dasta* (cultural squad) of the BSP, the activities of which have been described in the earlier chapters. If we analyse the discourse of the folk singer given above, it can be revealed to some extent that the Dalit attempt to inject into their consciousness the belief that they were the rulers, acts as a challenge to the authority of the upper castes. Also, by arousing their memories and iconizing their heroes of the 1857 Rebellion, they feel a sense of being part of the nation and assert their right to a share in it. And by projecting Mayawati as the incarnation of the Dalit women heroes, the party tries to reinforce her courage and her ability to challenge the hegemony of the upper-caste *Manuvadi*s. So while they try to make them believe in Mayawati's miraculous courage, they also try to enthuse them to become militant and fight against the oppression and exploitation that they have been suffering at the hands of the upper castes. Thus the ways in which identity history is used for achieving these purposes can be clearly seen. The multiple constructions given to these identity histories are meant to strengthen Dalit mobilization and empower them to assert themselves in the State-sponsored power discourse.

Dalit Location and the Narrative of Courage

An example of how a marginalized caste picks up an icon and uses it to carve their identity history can be seen in the case of the Bhangis. Mahaviridevi has emerged as an important marker of the identity of the Bhangi community. It is interesting to know that with the growing needs of Dalit politics of the BSP, the narrative on her story was extended to the entire Dalit community. The popular narrative about Mahaviridevi, as documented by Dalit writer Dinkar (1990: 27), is that she was a saviour of the Dalits and was prepared to fight against even the rich and landed, if they infringed upon the rights of the Dalits. Although she lived a life of great penury, her motto in life, which she tried to inculcate among the women of her community, was to live with respect and die with respect.

Maharviridevi is popular in the Muzaffarnagar region of western UP. Plays based on her life are regularly performed and many folk poets

have composed poems on her life. Popular folk singer Arjun Gayak of Agra sings:

Mahaviri Bhangin ke ganwa bhaiya gave ke pari
San sattavan ke gadar mein di usne kurbani
Angrezon ke samne usne haar kabhi na maani[2]

(Translated)

(Brother, you will have to sing the song of Mahaviri Bhangin
She sacrificed her life in the 1857 Rebellion
She never accepted defeat before the British.)

Deval Kavi, a poet born in Muzaffarnagar but settled in Agra, recites the following poem:

Chamak uthi san sattavan ki vah talwar purani
Mahaviri Bhangin thi bari mardani[3]

(Translated)

(The old sword of the 1857 Rebellion shone brightly
Mahaviri Bhangin was very masculine.)

Through such poems and songs, a popular image of Mahaviridevi Bhangin has been created in the minds of the people. The BSP has picked up the image and used it for the political mobilization of the Bhangis of that region and the Dalits as a whole all over UP. While using her myth to shape the public image of Mayawati, the BSP has used two ideas that are related to the Mahaviridevi myth, namely 'living and dying with respect' and 'saviour of Dalit community.' This is an example of the party's methods to create a semiology from the image of the past and transfer this symbolic power to the image of Mayawati.

When the Bhangis write their caste history they mention the name of Mahaviridevi in glowing terms. (B.S.R.S. Nath has written two books which document the Bhangi caste history (Nath 1998a, 1998b). In these books, he writes that not only were the men of the Bhangi caste ready to lay down their lives for the sake of their motherland, but the women too were equally courageous. Along with twenty-two other Bhangi

women, the courageous Mahaviridevi became a martyr while fighting against the British. Living up to her name which means 'brave,' Mahaviridevi was fearless. She stood up against the British soliders and fought them undaunted.

The Bhangis, the community to which Mahaviridevi belonged, is among the lowest untouchable castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy. They have been associated with scavenging and sweeping and even today a good number of them serve as sweepers in public and private establishments. They are widely distributed in UP, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and Chandigarh. Their total population in UP, according to the 1981 census, is 744,821. They are predominantly found in the rural areas, but a good number of them—271,801 persons (36.4 percent of their total population)—have returned from the urban areas. They are known to be non-vegetarian and to occasionally consume alcoholic drinks. The Bhangis recognize themselves as Shudras and they observe Hindu rituals on birth, marriage, death and other social occasions (Singh 1993: 107). Their caste name has been derived from the Sanskrit word *bhangi* which means hemp. It seems to be an allusion to the caste members' drinking habits, since the Bhangis are very fond of drinking *bhang*, a country liquour. The Bhangis were described as a representative of the *Chandala* of Manu, who is said to have come out of the union of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman. The Bhangis were traditionally associated with the tasks of scavenging, sweeping, basket-making and so on. They were brought into urban areas in the colonial period to perform the first two roles and they gradually became an urban community. But with the widespread use of septic latrines and other modes of public conveniences, the practice of carrying night soil has perceptibly declined now in many parts of urban India. The National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their Dependents (1991–92) seeks to liberate the Bhangis from their existing 'hereditary, obnoxious and inhuman occupation of manually removing night soil and filth' and to provide for and engage them in 'alternative and dignified occupations' over a period of five years (Annual Report 1991–92, Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi). The Bhangis are now slowly taking to other occupations. Literacy and education are both slowly increasing within this community. Their literacy rate according to the 1981 Census is 14.31 per cent (22.26 per cent males and 5.35 per cent females) (ibid.: 108).

Being an untouchable lower caste, the Bhangis have always been extremely deprived and marginalized by the upper castes in whose houses

they used to work. Around 1923, the Arya Samaj began to conduct socio-religious reforms among the Bhangis, education being one of the areas of reform. After 1940, many Bhangi students began to enrol themselves in schools providing free education. The Marwar Lok Parishad, Marwar Mehtar Sudhar Sabha and later the Rajputana Mehtar Sudhar Sabha helped the Bhangis to further change their lifestyle. With the recent assertion of identity by marginalized Dalit communities, some of the Bhangi communities—the Bhangis, the Mehtars, the Lalbegis and other castes that were associated with scavenging in the past—are now coming together as one community, claiming a common descent from the legendary saint Balmiki, author of the most important Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. The story of their caste history has been documented in the book *Balmiki-Balmiki*, written by Badri Prasad Balmikanand, a Dalit social reformer, who worked for the uplift of the Bhangis by setting up a number of schools in UP (Balmikanand 1974: 26). According to the story, Saint Balmiki, with whom the Bhangis associate themselves, was not a Shudra or a lower caste. From the *Ramayana* we can glean that his father was Pracheta, which was another name of Lord Varun, the God of Wind. This implies Balmiki was a Brahmin. But Balmiki was a highly humane man, who did not believe in discriminating anyone on the basis of his caste. He preached love and compassion for all. It is also understood from the *Ramayana* that he had a group of 2,000 select followers whom he named Balmikis. The descendants of these followers are the Balmikis of today.

To explain their marginalized social, economic and cultural condition today the Balmikis assert that nearly 5,000 years ago when the Aryans invaded North India, their ancestors (Balmikis), who were the original settlers of those regions, were the rulers, and priests. These brave people put up a stiff resistance which led to gruesome fighting and bloodshed. The Aryans received a great setback in these battles but gradually regained their strength. In a bid to take revenge, they conspired to deplete the Balmikis of their power by dividing and fragmenting the large number of small Dalit communities so that they could not fight against the Aryans unitedly. The Brahminical Aryans exploitated and oppressed these Dalit castes. They refused to accept their saints and wise men and instead imposed the Brahminical Vedic diktats on them, declaring them as untouchables and outcastes. They forced the people of these castes to perform lowly activities. Gradually these castes fell into a deep mire of poverty and backwardness. Their glorious history was completely overshadowed. With time their condition only worsened. Even after so many

centuries these castes have yet to recover from their pitiable condition (Nath 1998b: 5).

IDENTITY HISTORY AND DALIT MEANINGS

While narrating the history of their caste, the Bhangis proudly cite Mahaviridevi as a shining example of their caste glory. She epitomizes the chivalry, bravery and valour this caste was once famous for, but which was lost under Brahminical cultural dominance. The story of Mahaviridevi is popular in the oral tradition of the Bhangis settled around Saharanpur and the adjoining areas. Gradually, it emerged as the story of the entire Bhangi community of UP, especially in their print medium, and developed as an integral aspect of Dalit identity. The way the Dalits remember and narrate the story of Mahaviridevi is similar to the way in which Jhalkaribai and Udadevi are remembered. While highlighting the qualities of these three heroines, a point that is emphasized is the militancy displayed by these heroes, a militancy that can be witnessed in the number of British soldiers killed by them. It is often repeated that the three heroines formed their own all-women armies that fought bravely against the British. But one difference between the stories of Udadevi and Jhalkaribai and that of Mahaviridevi is that the former are shown to be close to two queens, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Laxmibai respectively; but according to popular narrative, Mahaviridevi was close to the people rather than to any king or queen. Mahaviridevi's story may be seen as a form of protest at the grass-roots level. In popular images of Jhalkaribai and Udadevi printed in posters and pamphlets, Jhalkaribai is portrayed riding a horse like Rani Laxmibai while Udadevi is depicted as holding a gun and shooting down British soldiers. Mahaviridevi on the other hand is shown lying on the ground holding a sickle. Stories about Jhalkaribai show her to be more intelligent than Rani Laxmibai while those about Udadevi establish her as being more patriotic than Begum Hazrat Mahal, who belonged to the royal Nawab family. Mahaviridevi, on the other hand, is shown to have led a mass movement by mobilizing women at the grass-roots level to fight against the British. From the way the story of Mahaviridevi is narrated, it is clear that the Dalits would like to democratize the symbols of Dalit protest by driving home the idea that there were many brave persons among them. Jhalkaribai and Udadevi were individuals attached with queens and courts (*durbar*) whereas there could be many Mahaviridevis

among the women who formed a part of her army. This might be an effort to glorify the mass leadership qualities among the Dalits which could be converted into people's power at the grass roots.

Through the history of identity, the marginalized Dalits attempt to portray four qualities that are supposed to be possessed only by upper-caste Kshatriya kings and rulers: regality (*rajatwa*), bravery (*viratwa*), wisdom (*gyan*) and leadership (*netritwa*). The tradition of writing caste histories, which started in the late 19th century among the upper castes of the Gangetic Valley, and which percolated down to the lower castes and Shudras, glorified the regality (*rajatwa)* and bravery (*viratwa)* of the concerned caste. These qualities are known as *kshatritwa* qualities since they are believed to be the qualities of the upper-caste Kshatriyas, the kingly, the landed, warrior caste. The narratives of the Dalits during this period thought of themselves not as cosmically created servants (*Shudra*) devoid of history but as the descendants of these divine warrior *Kshatriya* clans, firmly rooted in the Indian past (Pinch 1996: 6). Their narratives however did not borrow directly from the upper-caste narratives but were innovatively reconstructed to suit their own logic.

In the context of the Dalits, the feudal qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* were given a different interpretation. When feudal values prevailed in society these qualities were meant to highlight the masculine, aggressive qualities of the kings belonging to upper castes who were ruthless towards their enemies. They spent most of their time in the luxury of wine and women, whom they mercilessly abducted at their will. These are largely decadent values today, but the Dalits use them to highlight how they fought against the conspiracy of the upper-caste kings and the Mughals who wanted to capture their territories, and how they protected their women from the barbaric designs of the invaders. The underlying intention behind the narratives infused with these values is to inculcate the sense of power and chivalry within the oppressed and marginalized Dalit communities.

If we analyse narratives of feudal chivalry we find that they are based on cruel and merciless killings over the abduction of a beautiful woman or the appropriation of a piece of land, both of which were thought of as privately owned properties. But in the descriptions of the chivalry of Dalit kings, there were two main reasons for battles and killings. One was to ensure social justice, as in the case of the Mushahar heroes, Dina and Bhadri, in the regions of Darbhanga and Mithila. The other was to fight against upper-caste kings to protect their territories. A third reason was

to defend their people in the feuds initiated by male relatives of upper-caste princesses who fell in love with lower-caste boys. This is what is believed to have happened in the case of Chuharmal, with whom the upper-caste Bhumihar princess, Reshma, had fallen in love. There was a bloody war between the two communities and Chuharmal, initially claimed as the hero of the Dusadhs, slowly emerged as a hero of the entire Dalit community. The memories around his narrative are used today by politicians to mobilize the lower caste communities living around Patna and Mokama (Narayan 2001b: 20).

The Pasis claim that they were the ruling community of the Awadh region in the 12th century. The narratives about their kings are filled with descriptions of their *rajatwa* and *viratwa* and their efforts to ensure social justice. The use of narratives that glorify the qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* is in fact a strategy adopted by Dalit writers and composers to inculcate self-confidence in the collective psyche of the community, and inject militancy and aggression into the oppressed and downtrodden Dalits of a multicultural and multi-community society in which many kinds of compititive interactions take place among various groups. This interplay of social tensions is reflected in the historical narratives but there are many compromises and negotiations.

WOMEN ICONS AND THE MAKING OF THE IMAGE OF MAYAWATI

In contemporary times, as Dalit narratives are being rewritten and recreated to awaken the oppressed Dalit communities, and with the dalit movement being spearheaded by a woman like Mayawati, the challenges of searching for and recreating icons is manifold. In the search for heroes on whom the image of Mayawati could be carved, women heroes like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi were picked up. These heroines are sometimes referred to by their caste names—Jhalkaribai Korin, Udadevi Pasi and Mahaviridevi Bhangi—but often also without their caste names so as to include the whole Dalit community under these symbols. These heroines are linked with the image of Mayawati and the qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* are bestowed on them as a narrative strategy to inculcate the qualities of aggression and militancy among the Dalits at the grass-roots level. Mayawati was then projected as their heir who would carry forward the legacy they laid behind in the mutiny of 1857. Building up on this theme, she was depicted as a brave and wise leader who is also highly patriotic, having devoted her life to the service of the nation.

A preconceived notion prevalent among the upper castes is that lower castes are not in a position to rule because they do not possess the qualities that rulers and kings need. The upper castes believe that since the lower castes have always been menial workers serving them, they were not fit to rule or govern. The narrative constructions of the Dalits in which they take pains to highlight the qualities of *rajatwa* and the fact that they had been ruling communities for many centuries are meant to break this preconceived notion. In this process, they also want to support the candidature of Mayawati as an able ruler of the Dalits and also of the country. As narrated by Bhullar, a Chamar living in Shahabpur, the Mahants of the Kabir Math of Banaras, do not just preach religion, but also teach about the art of good governance (*Rajdharm*) and politics. They try to make the Dalits understand that Mayawati has all the qualities of a good ruler and so they should all support her. Mayawati is the heir to the legacy passed down by the benevolent, kind and just Dalit rulers who have ruled for many centuries.[4] She is portrayed as able and powerful, full of masculine qualities, yet very feminine. Mayawati herself, during public meetings with bureaucrats and government officials, always projects her leadership qualities by highlighting her masculine characteristics of aggression and arrogance. She tries hard to subvert the upper-caste notions of femininity and lady-like behaviour, which are associated with meekness, mildness, subservience, docility and a hierarchical form of address. Male officials and rival leaders are addressed as *tu* or *tum* (an impolite form of 'you') rather than the *aap* (which is a more respectful form of 'you'). Colloquial terms of address like *arrey* and *terrey*, used mainly by upper-caste men to address lower castes, appear frequently in her conversations and she uses abusive words and slangs. Words that connote inherent masculinity, violence and aggression, like *kuchalna* (crushing) and *ukharna* (plucking out from the roots) are also thrown into her conversations. For example, during a rally held in Lucknow on 19 September 1998, Mayawati warned the then chief minister, Kalyan Singh (of the BJP), that if he tried to carve the picture of a lotus (the symbol of the BJP) on the gateway of Ambedkar Park then the 'flower would be crushed' (*kuchal denge*). Also, if the statue of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, an icon of the BJP, were installed in the park, it would be 'uprooted' and 'planted' in Lakshman Park (another park in Lucknow).[5]

The image making of Mayawati is a fusion based on the symbolic use of icons related with the 1857 Rebellion, the Dalit rulers of the medieval period, the dissenting heroes of folklores from epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and social reformers like Ambedkar, Periyar and

Shahuji Maharaj. This technique is markedly different from the image making of Indira Gandhi, another woman leader who emerged in North India and who made an indelible mark in the history of the country. The image making of Indira Gandhi was based on the latter part of the national movement which was dominated by Gandhi and Nehru. Her image is that of the daughter of a towering personality who played a yeoman role in securing India's freedom and who sacrificed everything for the sake of the nation. She is also believed to have been the heir to Gandhiji's political inheritance through her father, who was known to be very close to him. She was her father's close confidante and counsellor and also his official hostess who kept his house neat and beautiful by her innate feminine qualities. She effortlessly imbibed statecraft simply by being with her father and watching him at work (Malhotra 1989: 60). Her image building had all the scope available to women in the Hindu culture, since women in Hinduism have a dominating role as Durga, the savior (Wadley 1988: 23–43). Thus, Indira Gandhi's image in the psyche of the oppressed took the form of a Devi.

Another charismatic woman political leader of the 20th century is Jayalalithaa Jayaram. She was the leading heroine in Tamil cinema who entered the Tamil political scene under the patronage of M.G. Ramachandran, himself a charismatic filmstar-turned-politician of Tamil Nadu. Cinema had a strong role in evoking popular perception of Jayalalithaa, since the use of visual and ceremonial aids helped to form an association with a glorious past. The extravagant visual propaganda deployed by the All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) for the Eighth World Tamil Conference held in January 1995 in the city of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, is an illustrative example. The choice of Thanjavur as the location for the conference was appropriate, since the city's prominence is rooted in the most illustrious period of Tamil history, the Chola dynasty that ruled from the 9th century to the 11th. Thanjavur was the capital of the Chola empire and is the site of famous architectural wonders including the Brihadeesvara temple. Jayalalithaa appropriated the Tamil conference to establish her leadership status. In one hoarding, the Chola king, Rajaraja Chola, patron of the Brihadeesvara temple, points towards a portrait of Jayalalitaa whose head is encircled by a halo. In the background, sculptors and builders are shown constructing a temple. Jayalalithaa's image, in the left foreground, is much larger than that of the other figures. On the right, on a slightly depressed plane, is the image of the Chola king directing his queen's (and the viewers') attention to Jayalalithaa. At first sight, Jayalalithaa emerges as the direct successor of a politically powerful as

well as a culturally accomplished ancient Tamil king. Another spectacular image displayed at the conference venue was a giant cut-out of Jayalalithaa in a brilliant blue cape and saree juxtaposed against the cut-out of a gold temple gateway (*gopuram*). The size of the human figure and the architectural representation are almost equal, in effect, causing Jayalalithaa to become synonymous with the gateway. In other words, Jayalalithaa is represented simultaneously as the protector of Tamil religion and tradition, as well as the gateway to the rich heritage of the Tamil race (Jacob 1997).

Jayalalithaa is projected as having both the qualities of masculinity and femininity. This is widely accepted by the people since, in Hindu philosophy, aggression and power are not the prerogative of males. In fact, action and power (*shakti*) are feminine principles which women are believed to possess far more than men. A woman who realizes her *shakti* is invincible and fearful and is likened to a goddess (*devi*). Hence, in the Hindu context, it is possible for a woman to act powerful and aggressive without being categorized as masculine. In the case of Jayalalithaa, the most important perception that she needed to evoke were the qualities of a heroine and a saviour of the people (Willner 1984). She encouraged a perception of herself as a maturing, compassionate, universal mother (*amma*), who is an authoritative power in the context of Hindu religion and culture.

While Indira Gandhi and Jayalalithaa were projected as *devi*, Mayawati's charismatic leadership was based on the Dalit hope for liberation from the centuries of oppression and humiliation. The people were made to believe that Mayawati could free them from this situation. So rather than being portrayed as a *devi*, she was portrayed as a courageous woman (*virangana*). While Jayalalithaa emerged as a Mother (*amma*) in Tamil Nadu, Mayawati was the 'sister' (*behenji*) who would spearhead the Dalit struggle for liberation. Significantly, the image of the *virangana* was also based on the past glory of Dalit kings and the Dalit role in the freedom movement. The image of Mayawati as the Iron Lady was created by Kanshi Ram and was then transmitted to the people as the Brave Iron Lady (*Lauh Virangana*), as has been mentioned in the introduction of this book. Her father used to refer to her as his 'tigress' daughter and proclaimed that he was very proud of her (*Mujhe apni sherni beti par naaz hai*) (Yad 2005b: 14). Thus, the metaphors that were used to portray Mayawati as a brave lady who would free the Dalits from oppression by higher and middle castes, gradually moulded her into a Goddess who would be the saviour of the Dalits. This portrayal has now been taken over

by Mayawati too, who has begun to project herself as a living Goddess. In a rally held in Delhi as part of a nation-wide tour to protest against the government's anti-reservation policies, she urged the Bahujans to contribute money to the party fund instead of wasting it on 'gods and goddesses' they had never seen. She said that she was a living Goddess who had given up everything in life to work for the welfare of the Bahujans. She added that she had even decided to remain single because of her dedication to the people.[6]

Dalit Goddesses and Mayawati

The Mother Goddess (*Devi Maiya*) is a patron deity for lower castes who have been historically prohibited from entering the upper-caste temples. There are many roadside shrines (*thaan*) under banyan and *neem* trees and tiny temples in lower-caste hamlets dedicated to goddesses like Kali, Behula, Jagdamba, Kamla, Sheetla, Phoolmati, Parvati, Ambika Bhavani, Koila Mata, Amna Mai, Kheti Bhavani, Mhathin Dai in different regions of North India. No priests are required at these lower-caste temples, although sometimes a person belonging to the gardener (*mali*) community looks after the cleaning and maintenance of the temple precincts. Sahaja Mai is one saint (*pir*) of the five saints (*panch pir*) popularly worshipped by the lower and middle castes in Bihar and UP. Maiya, another goddess, is worshipped by the lower castes, particularly the Mushahars, the Doms and the Dushadhs. Shahjadi Mai is worshipped in the south-west part of Bihar. Many of these goddesses are not popularly worshipped by the upper castes, even though they are supposed to be the sisters of Mother Durga, a goddess popularly worshipped by them. Some other goddesses are known to be forms of Goddess Kali, the demonic incarnation of Durga and are considered to have control over diseases. They are worshipped and propitiated whenever there rages an epidemic or a disease. If propitiated, she will prevent diseases, but if angry she will bring it upon those who have offended her. Mari Mai, the goddess who controls cholera, has special shrines, and the *neem* tree is worshipped as her special abode. Umariya Mata is also worshipped in cases of cholera. In some places, even a plague-goddess, called Kamthi Mata, is worshipped (Bharati 2000: 2).

The goddess who is largely worshipped by most of the lower castes of UP is Sitala Mata (mother of small pox) and her other *avatar*s like Kalejewali (one that controls the liver), Thandi (one that loves the cool),

Phapholewali (one who controls the vesicle) and Agwani (the fever goddess). Her worshippers are women and children, never men. She too is said to reside in the *neem* tree, although she has special shrines and small temples that are in the charge of a devil-priest or a low-caste man, usually a Chamar. In some places, like Muzaffarnagar, she is worshipped as Ujali Mata or the Bright Mother. Other shrines are located at Sikandarpur; in Bijnor, Raewala, Dehra Dun and in Jalon. These goddesses seem to have been worshipped for many centuries by the lower castes especially the Chamars, as has been documented by Briggs (1920). He mentions that Sitala Mata's elder sister is worshipped as *Chamariya* (one who controls small pox) (derived from the caste name Chamar). When this disease strikes a person, offerings are made to her in the form of a pig sacrificed by a Chamar. Sitala Mata's younger sister is Phulmati, who represents a mild form of small pox. The other sisters of Sitala Mata are Basanti and Lamkariya (Bharati 2000: 137–38).

The popularity of goddesses based on *tantric* (occult) practices, in which women are looked upon as *devi*s, may be another reason why goddesses are revered by the the lower castes. Tantric forms of worship in which Goddess Jagdamba and other goddesses are worshipped, is also very popular among the lower castes in UP and Bihar. The priests who conduct prayers belong to the lower castes and are called *bhagait*. Many folk songs called *bhagait lok geet*, in which goddesses Jagdamba and Saraswati are glorified, are sung as a part of these prayers (ibid.: 3). The *bhagait*s also work as *ojha*s or *tantric*s who are called in to exorcize evil spirits. Thus; the image of Mayawati has been extended from that of the Iron Lady and *virangana* to one of a *Devi*, which is a very influential symbol in the collective psyche of Dalit castes.

Mayawati did not have a famous lineage whose legacy she could use to carve her image. Neither could she link herself to the leaders of the nationalist period since, rather than developing their won leader, the Dalits had always been a part of the crowd gathered by the upper-caste leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and others in various movements initiated by them. A Law graduate from a lower middle-class family living in Delhi, Mayawati's journey that culminated in the first Dalit woman chief minister is fraught with many interesting aspects. Mayawati was born on 14 January 1956 and was the second among nine offsprings and the first daughter. Her father was a clerk in Delhi's telecommunication department. He christened her Mayawati, which meant good luck or prosperity, since he was promoted on the very day of her birth, which he took as a good omen. Since the family had to survive on the single income of Mayawati's father,

Mayawati's childhood was spent in poverty. Her mother later bought a few buffaloes whose milk she sold to supplement the family income. Since her childhood, besides studies, Mayawati was interested in the issues facing the people of her community. Early in her life, she studied the life and vision of Dalit leaders like Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, Sant Kabir, Sant Ravidas and Periyar. Every year, on the birthday of Dr Ambedkar, the entire family attended the meetings organized to commemorate the occasion. It was there that Mayawati got the opportunity to learn, first hand, the problems facing the Dalits. She also got to hear the speeches of the Dalit leaders of that time and was also exposed to Dalit popular booklets highlighting the caste histories of various Dalit castes, and to books propagating Ambedkarite ideas. This early grounding in Dalit literature laid the foundation of her deep interest in the oppressive situation faced by the Dalits. She was greatly inspired by the writings of the Dalit litérateurs and the seeds of rebellion that had been sown into her started striking deep roots (Yad 2005b: 6).

In the 1970s just after the Emergency, the Janata Party organized a three-day debate at the Constitution Club in Delhi called 'Break the Caste Movement' (*Jati Toro Andolan*). As a representative of the All India Ladies Youth Student Association of which she was a member, Mayawati was invited to speak at the conference. At the gathering, Raj Narain, the then leader of the ruling Janata Party, referred to the Dalits as Harijans. This greatly angered Mayawati. When it was her turn to speak, she vehemently protested against it. The Dalits attending the conference became excited and started chanting anti-Raj Narain slogans. When news about the conference reached Kanshi Ram, the founder of BAMCEF, he immediately foresaw the leadership potential of Mayawati and went to meet her to discuss the launching of the BSP.

Initially Mayawati's father was reluctant to allow his daughter to enter into politics. He felt that the BSP would not be successful as a party and his daughter's life would be ruined. He was very keen to see his daughter become an IAS officer, which would ensure her authority, power and benefits. In Kanshi Ram's own words:

> Keeping in mind Mayawati's father's initial objection, I gave her immense scope to develop her potentials as a Dalit leader. I started projecting her as an Iron Lady who would fight against injustice and oppression. Initially my strategy was met with stiff resistance by the other Dalit leaders. They began to criticize Mayawati and lay hurdles before her. In 1982–83 when DS4 (Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samity) was launched, Mayawati got a marvellous opportunity to display her talents at the numerous functions organized under its

> auspices. On the one hand, her name and fame spread among the masses, on the other hand, the older established leaders became highly jealous of her growing popularity. It was at this time that the BSP was launched. Mayawati was fielded from the Muzaffarnagar constituency, and she fought for the Lok Sabha seat. She won the largest number of votes among all the Dalit candidates fielded by the BSP in all the constitutencies. This led to greater envy among the other Dalit leaders. In 1985, I gave her the opportunity to nurse the Bijnaur Lok Sabha constituency during the by-elections. She succeeded in making it a three cornered fight although she was comparatively new in politics. The senior Dalit leaders were unable to tolerate Mayawati's steadily growing success. They started pressurizing me to withdraw my support of her. But when I refused, many of them left the BSP in annoyance. But today those leaders have faded into oblivion while Mayawati has been elected the Chief Minister of the most populous state of UP thrice. I don't know what her opponents think about this, but I believe that the initial resistance faced by her was what helped to strengthen her and make her an Iron Lady. (Yad 2005b)

Gradually, as Mayawati metamorphosed into a strong Dalit leader, her image had to be carved into the minds of the people. But the path taken by Kanshi Ram, her mentor, was grossly different from that of Indira Gandhi's. In the initial years, large cut-outs of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati were hung up at the BSP offices. The amalgamation of these two leaders formed the collective psyche of the Dalits. But when Kanshi Ram had fallen ill and had slipped into a coma, Mayawati's image became sufficient to attract the Dalits. Gradually, the number of Kanshi Ram's posters began to fall and he started slipping out of the memory of the Dalits. His place was taken up by Mayawati as can be seen in the fact that it is Mayawati's birthday and not Kanshi Ram's that is celebrated with great pomp and show by the BSP. These occasions are used to portray the image of Mayawati as charismatic and powerful and as the liberator of the Dalits.

How do these icons and identity histories create memories in the collective psyche of the Dalits and converge into the image of Mayawati? These icons and heroes are repeatedly mentioned by the BSP and by Mayawati herself in political discourses at the grass-roots level. The BSP leadership encourage MPs and MLAs to earmark some funds for erecting statues, establishing memorials, and organizing celebrations and festivals in honour of these icons. *Mela*s are also organized in which *nautanki*s and plays are held depicting the life stories of these icons. During these gatherings, temporary stalls are put up in which cassettes, posters, booklets and other paraphernalia are distributed. The discourses presented during the inauguration of statues and other functions are such that a homology is created between Mayawati and the icons so that identity of

the icons merges with the identity of Mayawati. Mayawati herself refers to these icons repeatedly in her political speeches, which helps audiences to link these icons with Mayawati. While delivering speeches to particular Dalit castes, she repeatedly refers to the heroes of those castes and in the process tries to evoke in them a sense of pride in their history and identity. In her election speeches, addressed to the Kurmi community, before the 2004 elections, she promised to set up a medical college in Amethi named after Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, whom she linked with the Kurmis. She also claimed that she had renamed Amethi as Sahuji Maharaj Nagar.[7]

The image making of Mayawati is also carried out through dramas and *nautanki*s that are performed in villages inhabited by Dalits. Babulal Bhanwra, a Dalit folk singer, has composed songs and plays in which Mayawati is compared to Jhalkaribai and Udadevi.[8] Even after plays that portray the deprivation of Dalits historically, members of the Jagriti Dasta start chanting slogans about the glory of Dalit leaders like Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Udadevi and Jhalkaribai, which the audience soon joins. This serves to create in the minds of the people, an image of Mayawati that is based on the images of these women heroes. I witnessed one such occasion in Shahabpur, just outside Allahabad, where a play was being performed to commemorate the memory of Swami Achhutananda. The play was called 'Dalit Samrajya' and was being held in a new residential colony that had sprung up along the highway leading to Allahabad. This colony was inhabited mainly by educated and employed Dalits who travelled to the city each day for their jobs. The play showed that before the arrival of the British, in the medieval period, the region around Allahabad had been ruled by a Shudra king but who was overthrown by upper-castes conspirators. Whenever the play showed the bravery of the Shudra king, the audience clapped ecstatically, but whenever it showed the cruelty of the upper castes, a loud hooting ensued. The hootings and clappings usually began with one or two persons, but, later, they were taken over by the entire audience. At the end of the play, when the compère announced that the upper castes of today were the descendants of the conspiratorial kings of the medieval ages, the members of the Jagriti Dasta began to shout slogans like 'Long live Ambedkar,' 'Long live Kanshiram,' 'Long live Mayawati,' 'Long live Jhalkaribai,' 'Long live Udadevi' and so on. Babulal Bhanwra, who was a part of the Jagriti Dasta team performing the play, told me that the members of the Jagriti Dasta were distributed among the audience. They initiated the hootings and clappings at strategic junctures of the play to mark out, for

the audience, their significance.[9] This was a part of the political strategy of BSP to arouse the emotions of the audience. These heightened emotions could then be channelized for identity assertion, which would then translate into votes through the process of parliamentary democracy.

Efforts to mythicize Mayawati were also carried out during the caste rallies organized by the BSP in and around Allahabad just before the 2004 general elections, a time when the icons of the Dalit castes were repeatedly being invoked and Mayawati was being linked with them. At a Pasi rally held in Ugrasainpur near Pratappur in Allahabad, Kesridevi, a local BSP leader, presented the history of the Pasi caste by referring to heroes like Udadevi. She also projected Mayawati as the torch bearer of the glorious past of the Dalits.[10] On 24 April 2004 there was a meeting (*sammelan*) of Dalit and backward castes in Allahabad, in which the icons of Pal, Maurya, Kushwaha, Kurmi, Nishad, Nai, Prajapati, Dhobi, Sonkar, Hela and Pasi were discussed. The speakers reiterated that the self-respect of these castes could be preserved only by Mayawati and so the reins of the leadership should be given to her. The BSP, in its political speeches, reiterated that the Bahujan Samaj—which was made up of 6,000 castes, each having its own identity history—should be merged into a single Dalit identity under the BSP.[11]

Many scholars fear that creating identity history among marginalized communities will lead to social conflict, violence and contestations between identities. Even so, it is imperative to see it from the Dalit perspective rather than from the perspective of control, governance and elitism. Since the last few decades, the Dalits in UP have been rebelling against the dominance of the upper castes and the acts of violence and exploitation inflicted on their communities. It is political empowerment that has helped them do so. This rebellion is at two levels. One is through the mobilization of their own self-confidence to fight against the exploitation of the upper castes, while the other is by highlighting incidents of oppression in the media. Seldom have the Dalits initiated incidents of violence against the upper castes on their own, not even when Mayawati was the chief minister of UP. Their acts of violence have always been reactions to the ones perpetrated on them by upper castes who stiffly resist the usurping of their authority, which has been culturally sanctioned for centuries. The role of identity history in raising the self-confidence of Dalit communities is significant and cannot be negated by saying that it increases fragmentation in society.

Today, as Dalit narratives are being rewritten to awaken oppressed Dalit communities and as the Dalit movement is being led by a woman like

Mayawati, brave women icons like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai and Mahaviridevi were required to be linked with the image of Mayawati. The qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* are bestowed on these heroes as part of narrative strategies to inculcate the qualities of aggression and militancy into the Dalits at the grass roots. These attributes have now been conferred on Mayawati who is projected as the heir to the legacy of these heroes. So, on the one hand, the Dalits are made to believe in the miraculous courage of Mayawati, while on the other, they are also empowered to become militant and fight against the oppression and exploitation that they have suffered at the hands of the upper castes. The narratives try to make the Dalits understand that Mayawati has all the qualities of a good ruler and should, therefore, support her. Mayawati is the heir to the legacy passed down by the benevolent, kind and just Dalit rulers and also the brave heroes of the 1857 Rebellion.

Notes

1. *Hindustan*, 21 September 1998.
2. Oral interview with Arjun Gayak, Agra, 11 October 2005.
3. Oral interview with Deval Kavi, Agra, 11 October 2005.
4. Oral interview with Bhullar, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
5. *Hindustan*, 21 September 1998.
6. *Times of India*, 1 October 2005.
7. *Hindustan*, 29 April 2004.
8. Oral interview with Babulal Bhanwra, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
9. Same as Note 8.
10. *Hindustan*, 29 April 2004.
11. *Hindustan*, 25 April 2004.

Conclusion

Dalit politics reached UP much after it did Maharashtra, but seen in the context of power, politics and electoral mobilization, the success graph of Dalit politics has been much higher in UP. This truth was stated by Kanshi Ram, the founder and theoretician of the BSP, in the following words: 'Dalit politics was a small plant in Maharashtra which I have transplanted and nurtured in the grounds of UP.'[1] Here, 'the ground of UP' denotes the social, cultural and political environment of the people in which the huge tree of Dalit politics has been spreading its branches. In the cultural context, 'ground' also stands for the cultural psyche of the Dalits which has been giving shape to their political language. Soon after the BSP was founded, its think tank realized that if it had to flourish in UP, the party would have to modify the stereotypical political language that was used just after independence by the RPI to mobilize the Dalits. The BSP leaders understood that they would have to make use of the cultural memory of the Dalits and become a part of their identity aspirations. Through political language of the BSP, its leaders would have to find ways to successfully resist the Brahminical prejudices that the Dalits have had to face everyday. In other words, the experiences of oppression and everyday humiliation faced by the Dalits would have to be converted into a language of dissent. To do this, the BSP leaders had to pick out cultural narratives of dissent, which the Dalits had already developed in their oral narratives in reply to the upper-caste Brahminical cultural questions, and link them with their political language. Only then would political language of the BSP become the language of the Dalit *Bahujan Samaj* (majority society).

Thus, in the BSP political epistemology, the pride of place was given to the cultural narratives of the Dalits—the myths, legends and stories—that were very much rooted in Dalit memory. This would ensure a space for the BSP in the collective memory of the Dalits and would, thereby, help in the political mobilization of the Dalits. The aspirations for a caste identity and the symbols linked with these aspirations would also have to be converted into symbols of aspirations for political power. The BSP worked hard to achieve this as it was an important political strategy for the party in UP. In this manner, the Dalit culture of dissent became the

basis of the political language of the BSP in UP. In addition, this culture of dissent also appeared as a repository from which symbols and icons could be picked up and used to develop the charisma of its leaders, especially Mayawati.

In UP, besides Ambedkar, Periyar, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, the other important cultural icons are the Buddha, Ravidas, Kabir and Eklavya. But the local women heroes of the 1857 Mutiny, like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Mahaviri Bhangi, Avantibai, Pannadhai and so on, attained most importance as symbolic icons of Dalit identity. Characters from folklores, including Chuharmal and Dina-Bhadri, also emerged as significant political players around whom the Dalits could be mobilized. Thus, fictional characters were transformed into real, larger-than-life characters.

In the Dalit struggle to capture power, their memories of the past, especially the local past, became important weapons at the grass roots. Memories have been an important constituent for the construction of Dalit identity even in the colonial period when the lower castes had started writing their own caste histories as a response to the colonial documentation project. During this period, many of the caste histories emphasized that the Shudras were the descendants of Kshatriyas. After, colonial rule, however, there was a clear break with the past, as observed by Pinch (1996: 147) who mentions that at this time caste no longer constituted the basis of an individual's political and legal being as it had in British India. In the 1960s, the new narratives of the past, written by the Dalits, emphasized their Dalitness—how they had been betrayed by the State and how upper-caste conspiracies had led to their present pitiable condition. This trend gathered momentum in the 1990s after the implementation of protective discrimination by the government as recommended by the Mandal Commission. This was also the period when the BSP emerged in the political scenario and very creatively used local myths, symbols, folk culture and memories in its electoral discourse. The RPI's mobilization of the Dalits of UP in the 1960s did not involve using the past. The party preferred to carry forward the legacy of Maharashtrian politics based on Dr Ambedkar's strategies.

The political scenario of UP towards the end of the 1980s saw Kanshi Ram launch a Dalit woman, Mayawati, as a mass leader. He projected her in public rallies as a leader of the Dalits and appealed to the people to support her candidature. To make people appreciate how much confidence he had in her potential, he hung up three big portraits of Mayawati in his room for all the visitors to see.[2]

In order to enhance her charismatic image, the BSP picked up women heroes of the 1857 Rebellion who could be projected as symbols of courage and leadership among Dalits and proclaimed Mayawati to be their heir. These women heroes were popular in different regions of UP and belonged to different Dalit communities. Despite this, they were projected as heroes of the entire community with whom Dalits of all castes and regions could identify. These heroes were given the qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* in the narratives around them. This was part of the political strategy of the BPS to spawn and nurture a sense of militancy and aggression among the Dalits at the grass-roots level. These qualities were then conferred on Mayawati who, as the heir of these women heroes, embodied these attributes as a legacy that had been passed down to her. Mayawati herself refers to them repeatedly in her political speeches. Through this discursive strategy of the BSP, the Dalits are made to believe in the courage of Mayawati, and are being empowered to fight against the oppression and exploitation that they have been suffering at the hands of the upper castes. The narratives also try to drive home the point that Mayawati has all the qualities of a good ruler (*rajdharm*) as she is the heir to the legacy passed down by the kind and just Dalit rulers of before.

These discourses are presented orally during the inauguration of statues and memorials, at the commemoration of Dalit heroes and at other Dalit gatherings. The presentation is done in such a manner that a homology is created of Mayawati and the icons of Dalit identity, so that the iconicity of these heroes merges with the identity of Mayawati. Print is another medium through which narratives created by Dalit leaders are transmitted to the common people. This medium is also of tremendous significance in sensitizing the Dalit population. Popular booklets and small newspapers are published by Dalits from small towns of Uttar Pradesh, which contain legends and stories about local heroes and the history of their role in nation making. These booklets and newspapers facilitate in the transmission of information to the literate section of the Dalit population at the grass-roots level.

Another medium that is used effectively by the Dalits because of its instantaneous impact is the visual medium. In the recent past, statues of Dalit heroes like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai, Suhaldev and Bijli Pasi have been installed at many roadside crossings all over UP. The statue of Dr Ambedkar is also found in places dominated by Dalits. These statues have a greater impact on the memory of people than merely oral or written descriptions. These statues, along with the narratives around them, help

in creating memories of the great icons of Dalit politics. Thus all the three mediums—oral, print and visual—are used transmit narratives among the people and arouse their collective memory.

These new histories of the Dalit culture of dissent that are being written and transmitted by the BSP help to demarginalize the Dalits, allowing them, in the process, to acquire a respectable position in contemporary Indian society. In this process, the Dalits also strengthen their own identities, thereby acquiring self-confidence, improving their condition and carving out a new future. Two main objectives of the BSP, visible in the language of political mobilization, are to develop a homogeneous identity among the fragmented Dalit castes, and to inject and encourage necessary feelings of hatred for, and suspicion and fear of the upper castes by condemning the Manu Samhita and denouncing the upper castes as being *Manuvadi*s. In the recent past, however, as has been mentioned in Chapter 5, under the compulsions of parliamentary democracy in which all political parties try to expand their vote banks by including more and more people their their fold, the BSP has been modifying its earlier attitude by saying that it is not against all upper castes but only against those who are influenced by the Manu Samhita.

The construction of the past provides the foundation for acquiring more democratic benefits and for justifying policies of positive discrimination for Dalits. It also helps in subverting the dominant discourse while also providing a strong basis for an alternative. In this process, the boundaries of history are also being expanded beyond the empirical-analytical to include the myths and heroes of Dalit communities. New histories are being invented and myths and icons are being developed for the assertion of the identities of these historically marginalized castes. These new histories, on the one hand, help to demarginalize the Dalits by freeing them from the burden of the past, and on the other, serve as a resource base for the BSP to politically mobilize them in the language that will be easily understood by the population at the grass-roots.

Notes

1. Story narrated by Nasimuddin Siddiqui in an interview taken by V.N. Rai, Ramanandsaraswati Pustakalaya, Azamgarh, 1997.
2. 'Baspa Aaj aur Kal', Pamphlets of Ambedkar Mission, Dr Ambedkar Mission, Kushwaha Book Distributor, Allahabad, 1997.

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